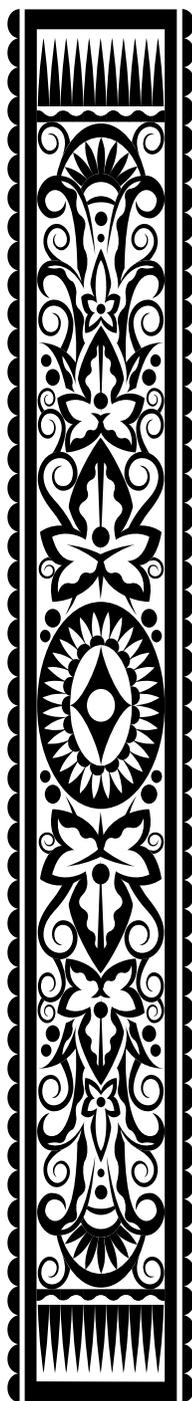


What
About
Tongues?

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What About Tongues?

The first issue that has to be addressed on the topic of tongues is, “What is *biblical* tongues?” The major flaw in most discussions on the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues is the failure to consider what the Bible says about tongues and instead concentrating on people’s experiences.

As an example, a television preacher published a pamphlet presenting the definition of tongues and the reasons for speaking in tongues. He taught that tongues is basically a “spirit language” in which you communicate directly with God. It “bypasses your mind,” and you do not even understand it unless there is an interpretation given. But is that an accurate description of *biblical* tongues?

A Biblical Definition

The word “tongue” is used frequently in the Bible. It refers most often to the physical tongue in the mouth, but it is also used to refer to a foreign language.

Revelation 5:9 describes a scene in heaven with saints and angels singing to the Lamb:

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book, and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.”

Here the word “tongue” is obviously referring to language—every tribe and *language* and people and nation. People from all the various languages of the earth have been redeemed by Christ.

Revelation 7:9 reads, “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and *all* tribes and peoples and tongues.” The word for “tongues,” *glossa*, is used here as well. In English “glossolalia” is a form of the word, *glossa*, meaning to speak in tongues. In Revelation 7:9 *glossa* is referring to languages. The nations, tribes, peoples, and languages of the earth are represented.

In Revelation 10:11 John writes, “And they said to me, ‘You must prophesy again concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.’” Again in this context “tongues” obviously refers to the various earthly *languages*.

Tongues and the Holy Spirit

Acts 2 contains the first occurrence of tongues in the context of a supernatural activity related to the coming of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:4 reads: “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.”

Later, the passage describes the reaction of the multitude in Jerusalem:

And how is it that we each hear *them* in our own language to which we were born? . . . Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God (Acts 2:8,11).

The word, *glossa*, is used again, but there is another word used here that is significant in the study of biblical tongues. Examine Acts 2:6: “And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered, because they were each one hearing them speak in his own language.” The word translated “language” is *dialecto*. In English it is “dialect.”

This word is also used in Acts 2:8: “And how is it that we each hear *them* in our own language to which we were born?”

The point is that the word *glossa* means exactly the same thing it means in other places in Scripture: It is a reference to an *earthly* language.

The Book of Acts clearly explains what happened at Pentecost. A diverse multitude of people had assembled at Jerusalem for the feast when suddenly a group of believers stood up and began

“speaking in tongues.” Scripture explains this phenomenon by indicating that they were *speaking in the languages of the people who were there*. Everyone heard his own *language*.

The gift of speaking in tongues evidenced at Pentecost was the act of speaking in languages that had not been learned or studied. The Spirit of God supernaturally empowered the disciples to speak in earthly languages that they did not know. The foreigners in Jerusalem who heard the disciples heard their own languages being spoken. It was not *babble*. It was not a *heavenly language*. It was an earthly language being spoken by these people.

Tongues As a Proof of Salvation

This was also the first occurrence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. If tongues refers to an earthly language in Acts 2, one would expect to see that pattern in other places as well. Is there a similar pattern elsewhere in Scripture?

Acts 10 records the salvation of Cornelius and his family who are Gentiles. As the Apostle Peter preaches to them, they believe the Gospel; they are saved; they are baptized with the Spirit; and they begin to speak in tongues.

“Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God (Acts 10:43–46).

These Gentiles began to speak in tongues upon the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Is this the same phenomenon as that recorded in Acts 2? Acts 11 provides proof.

In Acts 11, Peter defends his preaching to the Gentiles. The Jews in Jerusalem had questions about whether preaching to the Gentiles was the right thing to do. Peter tells them that God appeared to him in a vision and instructed him. Then in Acts 11:15 Peter says, “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them *just as He did upon us at the beginning*” (emphasis added).

Would the Jews present with Peter at Cornelius' house have accepted mere babbling as valid evidence of the Spirit's coming? What happened to the Jews in Acts 2? They began to speak in other earthly languages. Peter said the *same thing happened to them as happened to us*. What would that require? It would require speaking in an earthly language that they had not learned or studied. An earthly language is being described in Acts 2 and in Acts 10.

Tongues As a Unifying Factor

To understand the appearance of tongues in the New Testament, it is important to understand the Book of Acts as a transition book. There are four occasions where tongues occurs in the Book of Acts: Acts 2, probably in Acts 8, Acts 10 and Acts 19.

In Acts 2, the Jews receive the Spirit and are brought into the Church. In Acts 8, the Samaritans believe, are saved, receive the Spirit and are brought into the Church. In Acts 10, the Gentiles believe, receive the Spirit and are brought into the Church. In Acts 19, the disciples of John the Baptist believe, receive the Spirit and are brought into the Church.

On each of these occasions the Spirit comes in a special way and manifests His coming by the speaking of tongues to a special group of people. It is always in the context of an apostle's ministry.

The presence of tongues in these instances served to unify the Church—it removed any question as to the validity of the conversion. The Jews from Acts 2 questioned whether the Gentiles should be viewed as part of the Church. However, any doubt was removed when Peter said, *They have received the same gift as we have*. From then on, there was no question that the Church would be comprised of Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans and followers of John the Baptist. It would be a unified Church under the leadership and authority of the apostles. Tongues served a very real purpose.

Tongues As a Sign of Judgment

The Apostle Paul refers to speaking in tongues as a sign:

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, "BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME," says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign (1 Cor. 14:20–22).

The quote Paul uses is from the Book of Isaiah. In the passage, the Prophet Isaiah is foretelling the captivity of the Northern Kingdom of Israel:

Indeed, He will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue, He who said to them, "Here is rest, give rest to the weary," and, "Here is repose," but they would not listen (Is. 28:11,12).

Note the context of Isaiah 28:11,12: "He will speak to this people with stammering lips," or as Paul puts it, "Through men of strange tongues." He is talking about the Assyrians. The Assyrians are going to come down and conquer Israel. The very presence of the foreign language of the Assyrians being spoken among the Israelites will be a testimony to them that they have been judged by God.

In the context of 1 Corinthians 14, the idea of a *babble* (a non-earthly language) is totally foreign. The verse Paul quotes from the Book of Isaiah identifies the word "tongue" as a *language*. The presence of a foreign language in Israel is a testimony of God's judgment upon them because He had brought the foreigners in to conquer them. In 1 Corinthians the presence of a foreign language being spoken among the Jews is a testimony to them by God that they are being judged for their unbelief and rejection of the Messiah.

Deuteronomy 28 promised this as well if Israel disobeyed God:

The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand, a nation of fierce countenance who shall have no respect for the old, nor show favor to the young (Deut. 28:49,50).

In Deuteronomy God tells Israel if they disobey Him, a nation whose language they do not understand will be brought to conquer them. In Isaiah God tells Israel that they have disobeyed Him. He is going to bring a nation (Assyria) upon them whose language they do not understand. Then in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul reminds Israel that this principle of judgment is still being evidenced. The presence of these foreign languages among the Jews are again God's testimony: "You have been judged by Me, and now blessing is brought to the Gentiles." In Scripture, biblical tongues consistently refers to actual earthly languages.

There is one more word to look at in this discussion of biblical

tongues. In 1 Corinthians 12:10, as he talks about the various gifts, Paul writes:

To another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues.

The word translated “kinds” in this verse is literally, *genos*. It means “nationality,” “race,” or “kindred of people.” Therefore, 1 Corinthians 12:10 says there are “various kinds of languages,” or “various *nationalities* of tongues.” The very use of the word “kinds” identifies “tongues” as an earthly language.

Biblical Tongues and Modern Tongues

Before pursuing the validity of modern day “speaking in tongues,” it must be measured in light of the Bible. From studying these passages in the Scripture, it becomes obvious that *tongues was the ability to speak an earthly language that had not been learned or studied*. That was the biblical framework when tongues were spoken. Is the modern day phenomenon biblical as some are claiming?

The modern day phenomenon does not meet the basic criteria of what is laid down in the Bible. Today it usually consists of people babbling. They claim, “This is it. This is the biblical phenomenon described in the Book of Acts. This is what happens when the Holy Spirit comes into your life.”

No. Wait a minute. That is not what happened in the Bible. The proof is not in the experience, but in sifting the experience through the Scripture.

The Consequences of Unsifted Theology

If one refuses to examine a practice in light of the specific criteria of Scripture, there is a loss of basis for testing it. To *accept* it because of some people’s experience poses another problem. The practice of babbling is not unique to Christianity—or even to the modern Charismatic Movement!

A man named William Samarian, a linguist, has written a book examining the phenomenon of tongues. He studied it in all different societies. The practice is not unique. Religious babbling does not even originate in the New Testament. This incoherent kind of speech has often been characteristic of unbiblical religions. Samarian shows

that there are all kinds of pagan cultures that practice babbling.

The Mormons also practice babbling tongues. They experience it just like some Christians claim to experience it. How would someone know which phenomenon is true and genuine and which is not? How would someone know who really has the Spirit and who does not have the Spirit if the *proof* is not sifted through the Scriptures?

Another explanation that is offered for modern tongues is that what is spoken is an undiscovered language. John Sherrill, a Charismatic himself, has written a book on this. He went to the effort of examining many different tongues-speaking groups—taking linguists with him, taking tape recorders, recording everything that was said, then having the linguists sit down and analyze what was said. None of them found any trace of a language. They concluded that people basically tend to babble in the syllables that are native to them. There is no basic framework. Furthermore, there is no relationship to the sounds and the meaning given to them. In other words, you may have the same sounds uttered on four occasions, and you will have four different meanings given to those sounds in the interpretation that is provided in the meeting. Something is obviously wrong! That is not a normal language! The words have no meaning and are just sounds. That is all it is.

No Evidence of Modern Tongues

The modern day Charismatic Movement does not meet the criteria of New Testament tongues. The gift of tongues in the New Testament was the ability to speak in an earthly, foreign language that you had not learned or studied.

It is not uncommon to hear second and third-hand experiences that go something like “You know there was this case where this person did not know any Italian and all of a sudden he started speaking Italian, and the person there said, ‘Hey, have you ever studied Italian?’ He said, ‘No.’ And he said, ‘Well, you were just speaking in Italian!’ ”

That makes a wonderful story, but it is amazing that it never happens in firsthand experience. The people in the Charismatic Movement themselves, who run around with the tape recorders trying to find it, cannot find it. It always happened “over here” or “over there.” The modern day tongues movement flunks the very first test.

It is apparent that the biblical gift of tongues is not being reproduced today. Nobody has been able to provide any concrete proof of it. Of course, the modern day Charismatic Movement is built on the premise that tongues is babbling, not a real language at all. However, this is a result of not carefully analyzing the Scripture to find out what biblical tongues were before accepting someone's experience.

Can God do the miraculous? Yes He can. Can God heal people? Yes He can. Does God heal people? Yes He does, but that does not necessarily imply that the gift of healing is present today. James says that if anyone is sick, let him call for the elders, let them pray for him. He does not say, "Call for somebody who has the gift of healing." Paul tells Timothy, even as his ministry has worn on, "Use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." He does not say, "Here, Timothy, let me just heal you."

It is important to recognize what Scripture teaches about the "miracle gifts." It *is* appropriate to pray for healing. God heals; that is supernatural—miraculous. However, that does not imply that anyone has the gift of healing: walking in, laying their hands on and it is done. There is a lot of trickery going on, a lot of hucksterism. What about Faith Healers? They are hucksters or frauds. Why? Because they cannot measure up to the biblical standard.

Then comes the question, "What is going on when people claim to be speaking in tongues?"

A variety of factors are often at work. There are books which describe how to begin speaking in tongues, you tilt your head back, close your eyes, open your mouth and you begin to make sounds, but you do not allow yourself to speak in your own language. You make a sound and just let yourself go. You can imagine what that would be like in a church setting, with someone saying, "That is it! That is the Spirit. You have got it!" But that is not the biblical phenomenon, and if you are looking for something that is not biblical, the Devil will provide it.

Ultimately it goes back to the Devil. Gullible Christians who are not careful in sifting things through the Word tend to get drawn into these kinds of activities. Someone may say, "I know a lot of good that comes out of it." However, you have to measure it in light of the Word.

It is important to be very careful not to become subjective in the pursuit of the truth and not to refuse to allow the Word to be the standard and criteria for living the Christian life. Issues must be carefully examined through the Scripture. If an activity such as speaking in tongues is biblical, then a believer should embrace it, but if it is not biblical, then no thanks.

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