

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

A large number of people, especially among those commonly known as “Pentecostals”, claim to speak “in tongues”, a miraculous occurrence first recorded during the first century church period. Still more, who do not claim to speak in tongues themselves, nevertheless believe that the miraculous gift of tongue-speaking exists today. A majority of Protestants believe that speaking “in tongues” was one of the miraculous gifts bestowed during the early formative years of the church, but which no longer is present. This discussion seeks to show that the miraculous gifts---including speaking in tongues---were for a specific purpose for a limited period, and no longer exist...as they are no longer needed.

JESUS AND MIRACLES

Jesus performed many miracles during his ministry. It was his way of showing that he was from God rather than someone out making false claims. Those who heard him had a right to check him out before accepting his words. Indeed it was his many demonstrations of a power that could only come from a divine source which led so many to become believers.

EARLY NEED FOR MIRACLES

God does not do things without a reason. Jesus instructed his apostles to go into all the world to preach the gospel. He knew that these men would need to be able to convince people that they were from God...just as Jesus needed to be able to convince people of who he was. In John 14:26 we find Jesus’ promise to send the Holy Spirit as a guide and reminder to assure the accuracy of the apostles’ memory of what Jesus had said. Just before his ascension (Acts 1:8) Jesus promised special powers for these apostles when the Holy Spirit came upon them. In the beginning of Acts 2 we find this promise fulfilled as the Spirit came on these men and they began to speak in tongues; that is, the words they spoke were understood by people who spoke a wide variety of languages. Indeed, it was this very miracle that amazed those present and guaranteed their close attention to the message of the apostles.

But speaking in tongues was only one of the package of miraculous gifts dispensed during the first century (see I Corinthians 12:28-30, Ephesians 4, and other passages.) As one traces the ministry of Paul he sees how Paul used miracles to support his preaching...and make converts. There was no established church and no tradition of Christianity. There was no New Testament. As Paul left a place with brand new Christians there would be a critical need to leave them equipped to keep learning and growing in faith. How was that accomplished? It was for this purpose that men were given miraculous gifts to provide the guidance that was needed. One of the gifts (I Corinthians 12:28) was of administration; that is, leadership, a much-needed element in the baby congregations.

GROWING TO MATURITY

For how long would these miraculous powers be needed. Paul clearly stated that this period of need would pass. In I [Corinthians 13: 8](#) he said this: "...But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away". He was obviously referring to miraculous powers....since there will *never* be a time when *no* knowledge exists.

The clearest explanation of the need---and the outgrowing of the need---for spiritual gifts is found in Ephesians 4:7-15. The reader should examine these verses carefully. Paul mentions several special gifts...and then gives their purpose..."...to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up..." But then he says "UNTIL".....indicating the coming of a period when they would not be needed.

Note the conditions which would characterize the coming period or condition: "...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the [Son of God](#) and become *mature* , attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ".

The next paragraph is very important. "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming." It would take a period of time for the [early Christians](#) to learn enough and to mature enough to become spiritually stable, strong enough in the faith to recognize and defend truth. And it was precisely for this purpose that Paul was always so busy teaching, preaching, and instructing people wherever he went. If one argues that these gifts are still needed....he must argue that God's people are *still* too immature and unstable to avoid being tossed back and forth by every wind of doctrine....which is obviously not the case.

WHO RECEIVED MIRACULOUS GIFTS....AND HOW?

We have noted the promise of miraculous powers to the apostles and also the exercise of those powers, beginning on [Pentecost](#). In the early days of the church we see repeated use of miraculous powers by the apostles as they went about teaching and preaching. Use of these powers confirmed the validity of the apostles' message....just as Jesus' miracles confirmed his message.

The miraculous powers had been bestowed directly on the apostles when the Holy Spirit came on them. The initial purpose was to support the message of salvation which Jesus had assigned them. Only later would others---non-apostles---receive miraculous powers. How did this happen? Did the Holy Spirit suddenly fall on them bestowing these powers...or did they receive them some other way? This is a *very* important question...and, fortunately, the Bible provides an answer.

In Acts 8 we read of Philip preaching in [Samaria](#), making a number of converts as he confirmed his message by performing miraculous signs. One of the converts was Simon the Sorcerer.

Notice carefully verses 14-19. Peter and John were *sent from Jerusalem* to Samaria. Why? It was not to preach, because Philip had already done that. Peter and John prayed for the new converts and *placed their hands on them*, at which time they received the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 14:

“When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, ‘Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit’”. If there had been a way for the new Christians to receive these powers without the presence of the apostles...there would have been no need for the apostles to make the trip...for surely they had plenty to do at home!

The facts are clear. The power to perform miracles was given to the apostles...*and to those on whom they laid their hands!* Simon was not trying to buy the power to do miracles---he wanted the power to pass this ability on to others...a power which only the apostles possessed. We do not know exactly how long the miraculous gifts lasted, but we can see a built-in termination period. When the last apostle died...and the last person on whom they had laid their hands died...there was no more power to pass the powers to others.

CORNELIUS’ HOUSEHOLD

The beginning of the preaching of the gospel occurred on Pentecost (Acts 2). As we know, it was accompanied by special miraculous powers. Despite various prophecies, it was not easy for the Jews to accept the fact that the gospel would be for the **Gentiles** also, just as surely as it was for the Jews. Finally it became time for the church leaders to learn that the Gentiles should be accepted. We remember the experience of Peter at the house of **Simon the Tanner**. Peter had a special vision through which God showed him that the Gentiles, previously considered to be “unclean”, were not so considered by God (see Acts 10: 27-29).

In this chapter we have recorded the first conversions of Gentiles. As a further confirmation of God’s approval, we learn (verses 44-48) that the Holy Spirit was poured out on these Gentiles and they spoke in tongues, praising God.

Many have drawn some very erroneous conclusions from this chapter. In order to get a better picture of what was going on, one needs to read chapter 11 which puts matters in a much better perspective. Some have contended that the events in this chapter show other ways by which people can receive the gift of tongues. But do they?

Peter had a problem. God had convinced him that the Gentiles were now worthy of hearing the gospel, just as were the Jews. BUT, the other apostles and leaders in Jerusalem did not have that conviction. In chapter 11 we see Peter being scolded for going to the Gentiles to preach to them. But then Peter related what had happened and how God had given to the Gentiles the Holy Spirit. This convinced the Jerusalem leadership that God had granted forgiveness to the Gentiles.

There is a key statement by Peter which is very revealing. In verse 15 he described the coming of the Holy Spirit as being “as he had come on us at the beginning”. By “the beginning” he was obviously referring to the events on Pentecost. So God had begun the church on Pentecost by a miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit....and had begun the ministry to the Gentiles in the same way! And both times it was Peter who had used the “**keys of the kingdom**”. The outpouring on Cornelius’ household was a unique one-time occurrence.....just as it had been on Pentecost. There is nothing in either event to apply to our era.

(In passing it is worth noting a very important fact about the Holy Spirit at Cornelius' household. Some have argued that the coming of the Holy Spirit on these people *before* baptism is proof that one is saved before baptism. But according to the scriptures these people were *not* saved when the Spirit fell on them....assuming that the angel told the truth! According to 11: 13-14, the angel told Cornelius that Peter would "bring you a message *through which* you and all your household will be saved". And when did the **Holy Spirit fall** on the listeners? In verse 15 Peter explained that "As I *began* to speak the Holy Spirit came on them..." He had NOT delivered the message through which they were to be saved...and therefore they were NOT saved. Was Peter speaking a bit carelessly? NO! Verse 4 tells us that Peter explained things "precisely". The purpose of the coming of the Spirit was to further convince Peter, those with him, and finally the Jerusalem leaders that God had granted to the Gentiles the right to receive God's salvation. It had nothing to do with whether or not these people were already saved.)

A PALE IMITATION

As one examines the claims of modern-day "tongue speakers" he notes that what they claim to have was not at all what the apostles had. NONE of today's claimants can speak in a way that those who speak other languages can understand them. The best they can do is make strange sounds and pretend---with no proof whatever---that it is miraculous. If any of them go to a mission area to preach, they have to study and learn the local language just as anyone else would have to do.

TESTING THE TONGUE-SPEAKERS

In I Corinthians 14 Paul gives some very specific instructions about public **speaking in tongues**. He writes (verse 27), "If anyone speaks in a tongue, two---or the most three---should speak, one at a time, and someone *must interpret*. *If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church...*".

We can see that there was a companion gift to speaking in tongues---it was the gift of interpretation, another miraculous gift. Many claim to have the power to speak in tongues...but how many claim to have the power to interpret?

In talking to people who claim to speak in tongues I have proposed a way in which I...and countless others...can be convinced that indeed this power exists today. (If I really believed in this I would be *delighted* to prove that what I had was from God!) There is a very simple test. All we have to do is find two people who have the gift of interpretation. Let these people listen to the one speaking in tongues, and then independently give the interpretation. If it is all for real, the interpretations will be the same. Guess how many have accepted my offer.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

As we have seen, it is rather easy to show from the scriptures that the period of miraculous gifts is over. However, a large portion of the "Pentecostals" place their confidence in emotions rather than hard facts from the scriptures. They are convinced that they have actually witnessed the speaking in tongues and it is very hard to convince them otherwise.

How can one explain the phenomena which many believe to be miraculous occurrences? It is helpful to [Google](#) “glossolalia”, the scientific name for what we call “speaking in tongues”. One will see that such occurrences are by no means limited to Christian groups....so it does not mean that it is from God! It is also helpful to learn that some groups actually *teach* their people to make certain sound patterns which they presume to be miraculous.

Is this a “salvation issue”? I doubt it. If one resists the scriptural evidence presented above, it has been my practice to discuss other vital issues, such as how one becomes saved....which IS a salvation issue. It is common for these people to be of the “pray Jesus into your heart” persuasion. It might be better to concentrate on how one is to be saved and urge them to take seriously the Lord’s instructions for how to be saved.

Hopefully the thoughts presented in this study will be helpful to the Bible student.

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