

Speaking in Tongues



Authentic or Strange Fire ?

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Dedication

To my wife, my three sons and their families.

Acknowledgements

I first need to thank my wife for encouraging me in the process of writing and for having the patience to endure my consistent quests to listen to me retell the content. Thank you for being my first proofreader.

Thank you to my fellow apologists at No Apologies for standing with me in the gospel for your love of the truth. I also want to thank you for not being afraid to speak about controversial subjects.

Many thanks to all those who read our content online and who follow our weekly youtube channel broadcasts.

Most of all, I want to give thanks and praise to God, for sending his son Jesus to save a sinner like me. Thank you for the good news of the gospel and the gift of your Word.

Introduction

Please Don't Skip this Section

It is a very serious thing to claim to be able to speak on God's behalf. The New Testament claims that to "Speak in Tongues" is a revelatory gift that should always be accomplished by an interpretation. An honest reading of the Pauline texts relating to our subject will demonstrate this unequivocally.

According to the Old Testament accounting of prophecy, those who claim to speak for God and whose words do not come to pass were to be put to death. God takes his name and his word so seriously that he gave some of the harshest words of warning to those who claimed to bring forth revelation from Him, who did not send them.

Let's for a moment consider a few of the words of warning from the prophet Jeremiah:

Concerning the prophets: 'My heart is broken within me; all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine because of the LORD and because of his holy words. For the land is full of adulterers; because of the curse the land mourns, and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up. Their course is evil, and their might is not right. 'Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their evil, declares the LORD. Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery paths in the darkness, into which they shall be driven and fall, for I will bring disaster upon them in the year of their punishment, declares the LORD... Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets: 'Behold, I will feed them with bitter food and give them poisoned water to drink, for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has gone out into all the land.' Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD... But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds.' (Jeremiah 23:9-12, 15-16, 22)

[1]

Many believers today do not understand the significance of the words "God said" or "thus saith the Lord". The New Testament gifts have a very specific purpose, back when they were first given and today. The revelatory character cannot be missed by the honest student of scripture.

Sadly, today we have turned them into tools for bolstering the feel-good message of "experiencing your best life now" that the modern evangelical gospel has been twisted into.

The Holy Spirit — far from being the person in the divine Godhead who is said to convict of sin and regenerate the hearts of sinners — has been turned into this “genie in a bottle” that exists for my personal well-being and for giving me “supernatural powers”.

If we want to avoid the sin of putting our own words into God’s mouth, then we should carefully study God’s word to see what it says about the gifts God has given for building up his church and "from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." (Eph 4:16) ^[2]

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[1] ESV

[2] ESV

Speaking in Tongues, Authentic or Strange Fire?

An in-depth analysis of "Speaking in Tongues"

The phenomenon has quite literally taken over much of the Evangelical church.

Writing a book on the topic of “Speaking in Tongues”, is certainly not the best way to make friends. Quite the opposite, it is the best way to be cancelled, using modern social media lingo. I have spoken to many sincere Pentecostals about this subject and often hit the following comment like a brick wall. “Don’t speak about this subject, you might well end up blaspheming the Holy Spirit”.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Time and again scripture calls us in the words of Jesus to: “seek and you will find” (Mat 7:7) ^[1] Yes, I am certain the command to “seek” includes prayerful seeking, but it certainly should be seeking out the will of God in his word. Paul praised the Bereans since: “they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” (Acts 17:11) ^[2]

This passage begs us to ask, what did Paul mean by “these things”? The context of the chapter, tells us about Paul, and how he reasoned with the Jews in the local synagogue: “This Jesus, who I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” (Acts 17:3) ^[3] I think it is safe to conclude he would have at this time also told them about the resurrection, and about the Holy Spirit being poured out on the church since he appears to do this everywhere. The Bereans are praised for checking to see whether what Paul had shared with them, was according to the scripture they had. What were those scriptures, you might ask? The scriptures of the early church as the New Testament was being written, was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. ^[4]



We can safely conclude that all our experiences can and must be validated with scripture

Anyone who proclaims, you are not permitted to evaluate experiences with scripture, using the false argument that this is somehow “blaspheming the Holy Spirit”, needs to study the context in which Jesus gave that particular warning. Can the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit be repeated today? Jesus Christ is not on earth, He is seated at the right hand of God. No one can personally witness Jesus performing a miracle and then attribute that power to Satan instead of the Spirit. ^[5]

Jesus repeated the most central command in all of the Old Testament: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (Mk 12:29-30) ^[6] Embedded in this command is the inference of using the mind and with that the power of questions to seek out answers.

Paul said that he made enemies by telling the truth: “Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?” Paul’s letter to the Galatian church has some very stern words of warning. They were in danger of adopting heretical doctrines & ideas that threatened the very gospel Paul had preached to them. What is the weapon Paul uses to diffuse these dangers? Scripture itself.

At all times we must be willing and courageous to evaluate our experiences against the yardstick of scripture. At times we must do as Paul warned the Corinthian church: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.” (1 Cor 13:11) ^[7]



There came a point in my own Christian walk, where I had to do likewise.

[1] ESV

[2] All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted, Crossway, Copyright c 2001

[3] ESV

[4] The Septuagint, The Greek Translation of the Holy Scriptures, <https://www.septuagint.bible/>, (January, 5, 2023)

[5] What is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? <https://www.gotquestions.org/blasphemy-Holy-Spirit.html>, (December, 10, 2022)

[6] ESV

[7] ESV

Strange Fire

What has strange fire got to do with it?

God is serious when it comes to his glory and honour.

You might be wondering why the title is “Authentic or Strange Fire”. For this, we must go to a time in the story of the Exodus and the time of the Israelites wandering through the desert. Moses had received very specific instructions on how Israel was to worship their God. God was not about to give his honour to another.

There is a story in the book of Leviticus that takes place after the tabernacle had been erected. Aaron was designated as the priest and responsible for the sacrifices. God had given detailed instructions on how this should occur. We can see these instructions in Leviticus chapters 7-9.^[1]

One day Aaron’s two sons decided to offer “strange fire”: “And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. (Leviticus 10:1, KJV)”.^[2] In the ESV version, this is translated as “unauthorised fire”.^[3]

What happens next is quite shocking to the modern mind. God not only rejected their sacrifice but also put them to death in an instant. The chapter gives us several clues as to what might have been the cause for God to punish Aaron’s sons in this way. The all-important factor was that their offering of fire was not offered in the way God had commanded. The modern mind is shocked to realise God is the owner of this universe and throughout scripture, we are told time and again, using analogies such as the potter and the clay, that God has every right to do with his creation as he pleases.

The point of this story is that God takes the worship of himself very seriously and we as humans are all too easily trapped into forms of worship that please ourselves rather than God. I can already hear the objector saying: “But that was the Old Testament, surely the God of the New Testament is not like that?”

In the book of Acts 5:1-11.^[4] we are told of a very similar event, during the time of the very early church. A husband and wife lie to the apostle Peter about a plot of land given as an offering to the church. They are judged with physical death as a consequence of their deceit. Whatever the conclusions one might draw from these two stories, one thing is certain. God wants us to know he is serious when it comes to his honour and glory.

All this should give us pause to think very carefully when we build a theology of the Holy

Spirit and His gifts as these all relate to and are intimately connected to the worship of our creator. Our own experiences, like the attempt of Aaron's sons to offer their self-defined version of the sacrifices, can be very earnest and even have a ring of truth to them, all the while at times being foreign to scripture.

Scripture is in the end the final authority and our own experiences must withstand the scrutiny of scripture. Our experiences must not become the foundation. We must avoid bending, twisting, or avoiding the authority of scripture to allow our experience to reign. Having said all of this, I am not saying all Charismatics are "burning strange fire", some no doubt do, each case would have to be judged on its own merit. This book is about seeing what scripture has to tell us on this subject, and my attempt to submit all of my ideas on this topic to the final authority of scripture. I would urge you to do likewise. Naturally, I cannot judge where you will land, nor am I, in any sense, suggesting that Charismatics at large, don't desire to submit to scripture.



Please don't succumb to the error of blanket judgments.

[1] ESV

[2] The Holy Bible, King James Version, Cambridge Edition, 1769.

[3] ESV

[4] ESV

Truth Can Withstand Scrutiny

Biblical truth is true truth

God is not frightened when we ask questions and especially those that pertain to our experiences.

My motivation to write this book is primarily related to my search for answers and my many conversations with friends in and out of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. I spent the best part of thirty years in several churches in the Pentecostal movement. The first twenty were in a group that may well have started as a genuine church plant, but soon enough morphed into a really bad cult. This book is not the place to dive into all the reasons why this church became a cult, nor am I suggesting all Pentecostal or Charismatic churches are cults. After finally managing to leave the cult behind, it was time for some good counseling.

Within a year my wife and I joined a new Pentecostal church, people were very kind and the behaviour of the church was certainly very different when compared with our first experience. By that time I was willing, and admittedly perhaps, ready to ask some very hard questions about theology. Maybe one could say I went through some kind of “deconstruction” process. I needed answers and it seemed the best place to find them would be at a Seminary where students dive deep into theology, philosophy, and apologetics. Given that I had previously studied for a diploma in ministry, the Seminary was happy for me to enroll in a master’s course. Apologetics seemed to be the subject that gave me the most room to ask every possible question and find some real answers.

Blind faith was a trap that had gotten me into so much trouble, now I needed to know answers to the most fundamental questions starting with the actual validity of the Bible itself. Why am I saying all this, you might be wondering. The Bible is what we might call “true truth” or foundational truth. This book is not the place for diving into that subject, needless to say, it is the foundation for all Christian truth and as the Reformers used to say, it is “Sola Scriptura”, or the final authority in all matters of faith and practice for the Christian. It’s not that church tradition has nothing to teach us, it certainly does, but the buck stops with the Bible and not the church. This is the dividing line between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic.

In the Gospel of John chapter 20, ^[1] we are told of Jesus appearing to several of his disciples. Initially, Thomas was not with those who saw Jesus. Upon hearing their testimony Thomas exclaimed: “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails... and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:5). ^[2] Sometime later, Jesus appears to the disciples again when Thomas is present. Given the solemnity of the moment, and that Jesus knew what Thomas had expressed, one might have expected Jesus to reprove and admonish him to “believe”.

Jesus, however, encourages Thomas to “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe (John 20:27),”. ^[3] Jesus shows compassion for Thomas’s doubting and questions.

God knows our hearts and knows all too well how we might struggle to comprehend and believe. This story confirms to us that it’s ok to ask questions. God does not need defending, he and his truth, his Word, can stand alone. True truth can withstand all our questions and all the scrutiny we can throw at it. The flip side is also true, people and organisations, that do not want you to ask questions, even and especially the hard ones, are likely to be somewhere on the spectrum of moving towards a cult.



If you are in a church that discourages you from asking questions, or avoids answering them, it might be time to leave and find a church that does.

In this book, I am going to ask some hard questions. If you are a Pentecostal, a Charismatic, have been one, or are thinking about becoming one, then this book is for you. Remember to have some fun along the way, give yourself the time out to ask questions and search out the answers. Above all, open the Bible and see if what I am saying is really so. Don’t take my word for it, find out for yourself. The truth is at stake.

[1] ESV

[2] ESV

[3] ESV

Proviso

What I am not saying & Questions I aim to answer.

We often jump to conclusions. To avoid this, here are some things I am not saying in this book.

Whilst this book is about “Speaking in Tongues”, people will naturally connect the ideas presented with the broader Pentecostal and Charismatic movement. No doubt there are people who “speak in tongues” in other denominations, but they are not the norm. People who believe in “Tongues” exist on a spectrum, there are those who believe in “Tongues”, but do not believe in other orthodox Christian doctrines such as the Trinity. This book is about “Tongues” and not about those who believe or practice them, even if I at times will refer to some experiences.

The book is not an evaluation of the movement as a whole, nor am I making a judgment about the eternal security of those who hold to this doctrine. Essentially I believe the core of the gospel is found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church chapter 15, in the first five verses. There, we see Paul refer to the basic foundational truths of the gospel, the good news of Jesus who came to redeem sinners.

If you have put your trust in the finished work of Christ and not your own works, regardless of whether they are Christian works, if you have come to Christ with an empty hand of faith, recognising that all you brought to the table was your sin that made his redemptive sacrifice on the cross necessary, then you are one of his own. Denominations don’t save, Christ does.

True believers exist in all churches. People who have made a false profession of faith sadly also exist in all churches. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movement has its fair share of churches where the “experiential” has become all there is, and the gospel is all but lost. The sad thing is that the very claim made by those seeking to receive and operate in the gifts and especially the “Gift of Tongues” — the gifts that are supposed to empower the believer who is not empowered — don’t appear to have made any real difference to the churches representing this claim.

The bitter reality is that — for some — the emphasis on the gifts has led to an under-emphasis on the gospel. The hard question that must be asked is whether it has turned into “another gospel” altogether.

Regardless, in this book, I simply aim to evaluate the modern expression of “Speaking in Tongues” with the Bible.

Before we move on from here it is helpful to note, that there exists a range of different views on how “Tongues” impact the church and the individual believer. It would take a whole volume of books to deal with each position listed here:

- (1) “Tongues” is *sine qua non* of salvation, i.e. the evidence of receiving the Spirit and without which there is no salvation
- (2) “Tongues” is the required sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as an experience subsequent to salvation
- (3) “Tongues” is a spiritual gift for those who seek it and is only practiced in private
- (4) “Tongues” a minor gift, still in operation today but not sought after
- (5) “Tongues” a practice believed to be counterfeit to the New Testament teaching on this subject
- (6) “Tongues” a sign of demonic oppression and demonised with more prejudice than Biblical knowledge

There are no doubt more positions than these and by now it should be obvious that I cannot answer them all in one book. I would like to state quite categorically that I believe position (1) to be biblically untenable. There are about 100 direct or indirect references in the New Testament to the fact that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone and not due to any of our works. Baptism is a New Testament teaching, no doubt, but salvation does not depend on it.

There is no salvific essence in water, the new birth is “from above” as the gospel of John so clearly states. In theological lingo this is called “regeneration”. It is God’s doing and it occurs when we come to believe in Christ in a saving way when we trust in the finished work of Christ for our salvation from the heart, i.e. it is more than “mental assent” and yet there are no works of ours involved.

I think we can safely discount item number (6) as well. I am not saying that at times strange things that are beyond just simple human feelings and emotions don’t occur in the more extreme expressions of Charismatic churches.

Position (2) is the de-facto Pentecostal standard position and this is the one this book is dealing with. Along the way, no doubt, we will deal in some respect with the other positions. The group I was involved with initially held position (1) and the churches I later attended held (2). Perhaps that is why I initially felt comfortable there. I had abandoned the “extreme” view and adopted the more “moderate” view. However, the cognitive dissonance I experienced when reading the Bible was still the same.

I simply could not line up what I experienced with what I read in scripture. Initially, I put it

down to my lack of understanding or study, so I studied more and attended a diploma course, all to no avail, the cognitive dissonance prevailed.

Eventually, I had to admit to myself that the only way to find peace was to let scripture rule my thinking and lay down my false ideas and cherished experiences at the door of scripture. The single most helpful thing outside of scripture was the study of the reformers. Given my German background, I was attracted to the writings of Martin Luther.

I later studied the writings of John Calvin and what is known as “reformed theology”. Today I believe this is simply “Biblical Theology” explained in the best way possible. But I digress.

Then there is the issue of what kind of “tongues” the Bible speaks of, and what kind of “tongues” people generally experience in the church today. Tongues generally fall into three main categories. I have used the greek words, since they more clearly than English, distinguish the meaning:

1. “Akolalia” - a speaker speaks in one language and the hearer hears in his own language (or one he understands).
2. “Glossolalia” - a speaker speaks in a language that has no correspondence to a known language.
3. “Xenolalia” - a speaker speaks in a known (foreign) language unknown to him.

“Akolalia” and “Xenolalia” are similar in that they both refer to languages current or historical to people on earth, i.e. they are real languages like English, French, German and Latin. The only difference here is what the speaker and hearer understand. “Glossolalia”, on the other hand, refers to heavenly or angelic speech that is ordinarily unintelligible to human beings.

Why this distinction, I hear you ask? Doesn’t the Bible spell out which one of those words is used, and that is it? When the term “speaking in tongues” is used in both the book of Acts and Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church, the term used is “glossa” i.e. the English word language. In old English, i.e. the English in use during the early translations of the Bible into English, “Tongue” was more commonly used to refer to a foreign language, and the rest is history.

We have to therefore refer back to the context of each passage concerned to ascertain which of the versions (1, 2 or 3) is being used in each of the New Testament renditions.



We have work to do.

I will dig into more detail on what I believe is the correct use in a later chapter. I mention it here so you the reader have an overview of what is involved with this topic and how the Bible

unfolds it. In the next chapter, we will take some time to list all the major questions believers tend to ask about this subject. As I then work through each of those questions, the nature of the “language”, mentioned in the New Testament “tongues” passages, i.e. which one of those “...alia” versions do we find in the writings of the New Testament. Sadly most Christians who debate about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, most frequently get stuck on whether they ceased or whether they have continued from the early church until today. We will review that, in the context of answering those questions to come next.

Importantly, however many believers get so stuck on the question of “ceased” or “continued”, that the question of the nature or expression of the gifts themselves falls by the wayside. I believe, if we can answer the — what — and the — why — questions then the issue of “ceased” or “continued”, will naturally be resolved.

It’s going to be fun.

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