

## TONGUES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The writer is keenly aware of the difficulty of saying anything new on the subject of tongues, and he knows, too, his own limitations as a somewhat unconvinced observer. But, after a renewed study of what has been written and a fresh look at the Scriptures, he does make bold to discuss the New Testament data in relation to the current and historical situations.

On the surface the task is a simple one, if for no other reason than the paucity of materials to examine. There is no whisper of tongues in the recorded words of Jesus or in the four Gospels except for a passing reference of uncertain meaning in the disputed ending of the Gospel According to Mark (16:17). To make that passage support tongues would prove too much. It would also support taking up serpents and drinking deadly things. Besides, the best manuscripts do not include these verses. So it can be safely said, as far as the record goes, that Jesus never spoke in tongues nor even suggested the possibility that it would be a good thing to do. Certainly He did not connect it with the fulness of the Holy Spirit, which He experienced (John 3:34) and which He promised to others.

Moving to the next book, the Acts of the Apostles, we find the only three reported historical events of tongues in the New Testament. These are given almost without comment. There is no command, exhortation, promise, suggestion, or evaluation. Simply the historical statement that people so spoke. There is no record that anyone sought or expected any "gift" of tongues or that the validity of the gift of the Holy Spirit was in any way connected with such a manifestation. At Pentecost tongues are reported as casually as the sound "as of a rushing, mighty wind" and as the "split darts like as of fire" (Acts 2). The difference is that the speaking in tongues attracted public notice, while the other phenomena preceded the assembling of the crowd. And Peter found it necessary to discuss the aspects that were the topic of discussion. Even then, he did not explain the tongues so much as the excitement, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the ability to prophesy. No occasion was made to exalt or recommend tongues. The only moral drawn was that there should be repentance, baptism, and receipt of the Holy Spirit (v. 38), for these things were for all. No further mention of tongues occurs anywhere else in the Scripture concerning any of the original Twelve or any of the 120 who were in the upper room. If the "manifestation" was permanent, we are not told. If there were recurrences, the Scripture is silent. No more mention of it is made than of living in a permanent wind storm or of wearing pointed halos of fire. The record says only that at Pentecost there was sporadic speaking in tongues "as the Spirit gave them utterance." As a student of the New Testament, the writer must look to the data in the Scriptures for the one authoritative source of the facts which must be studied.

The other two incidents in Acts are still more briefly mentioned. In the house of Cornelius Peter was convinced that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was genuine as at Pentecost "For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God" (10:46). Whatever significance tongues had at the first outpouring of the Spirit by way of inaugurating a universal gospel, it apparently had the same obvious significance at this first frontier of Caesarea. In any case, Peter uses the incident to convince the brethren that God's grace is also for Gentiles.

Once more, in distant Ephesus, Paul finds adherents of the "John cult" who were not yet aware of the glorious fulfillment of the gospel in Christ and in the fulness of the Spirit. After bringing them up to date in their knowledge and experience, Paul "laid his hands upon them and the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied" (19:6). Thus ends the New Testament data on Pentecostal tongues as far as the record goes, with the possible exception of I Corinthians 12-14. But these latter chapters will be discussed separately in their proper context.

New Testament narrative is silent about any further event that was considered worth reporting as such after these three incidents. This fact greatly simplifies the problem of the exegete and materially adds to the burden of the exponent of tongues who claims New Testament authority for the movement. And in all three accounts there is no command, promise, exhortation, or suggestion relating to the sign or outer phenomena. The emphasis is totally other. They sought the promised Holy Spirit. The particular manifestations were incidental and unexpected.

Only I Corinthians 12-14 remains among the New Testament data. Here obvious reference is made to the existence of some kind of phenomena called "tongues." It is mentioned only because it is causing trouble. It is likely that Paul is answering a question raised by concerned brethren in Corinth. No reports are given concerning specific incidents. No promises or commands are mentioned for seeking tongues. Nor is there any attempt made to promote them in any way. Rather, the thrust is to limit and control something that exists and has been abused. However, in the three chapters given to the topic, there are many revealing sidelights which give us windows by which to peer into the practices of the early church and to see what tongues meant in at least one church. Admittedly, the Corinthian tongues are more of an abuse than a use of whatever divine gift there may have been. But since this passage is the only data in the New Testament other than the three Acts events, it must be studied as fairly as possible for any light it may shed on biblical teaching. In any case, it is these four passages that must furnish the basis for the practice of some two million people who claim tongues as the sign of their acceptance with God and who consider the rest of Christianity correspondingly dead or deficient because of the lack of this "evidence."

With so few passages to consider, and with no difficult vocabulary involved -- in any obvious way at least in the Scripture -- our task should be simple and plain. Instead of the contemporary confusion, we might hope for the clarity of New Testament exegesis. Some things are indeed made clear and certain guidelines appear for the study. But the answer to some aspects of the problem is not so simple as it looks. The Scripture passages do not contain sufficient data to fix the connotation of the key words. And there is no adequate Old Testament usage to clarify the meaning of the terms. Nor is it safe to assume that the pagan frenzies of the time were proper illustrations of New Testament grace. One is driven to seek Christian phenomena to explain real or alleged Christian experience. Both the sympathetic and the unsympathetic exegetes have to turn to the only data that remain -- relevant phenomena in church history and in current practice. This fact brings the exegete right back into the contemporary scene for part of his data. There must be honest biblical study, but there can be no ivory towers of immunity from current issues.

Several questions arise in such a study of Scripture and experience. First, what are Pentecostal tongues? What is the relationship of this manifestation to the gift of the Holy Spirit? Are the other Acts incidents similar to or identical with the first? Are the "Corinthian tongues" truly Pentecostal? And finally, what principles of doctrine and practice emerge from the study?

First, it might be well to examine the view of a number of the older commentators (as Matthew Henry, Clarke, and Calvin). They tend to simplify the whole "tongues" phenomena of the New Testament into "the use of a dialect of foreign but thoroughly intelligible language." If it is ever "unknown" or new, it is only so in the sense that the wrong people are present. It is as understandable as English to an Englishman or Greek to a Greek. Hence the only possible need of an interpreter would be that those present did not happen to know that particular language. At Pentecost, no such problem existed. The very purpose of the "other tongues" seemed to be that "other people" were there to whom the Galilean dialect of Aramaic or Hebrew was not familiar. By marvelous divine intervention, the speakers were able to cross over the language barriers and to speak clearly in the languages of the

Parthians, Medes, and Elamites without the usual processes of learning. Likewise, the hearers may possibly have had special assistance, though this is not necessary to the account.

It would not take much imagination to apply the same kind of interpretation to the incident at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:46) or to the Ephesian group (Acts 19:6). Whatever testimony or lesson was intended concerning the universality of the gospel at Pentecost might be equally appropriate in the first break-through to the Gentiles and in the great westward thrust of the gospel. At least the reference is not differentiated by comment. And attention is called to the similarity of the outpouring of the Spirit at Jerusalem and Caesarea.

The real problem comes at Corinth. Is Paul now restricting and implying criticism of the same thing that happened at Pentecost? The word is the same. "Glossai" is the standard word for languages. And the usual meaning of language is intelligent and intelligible discourse -- conveying ideas rationally from one mind to another. Why should it be otherwise here? Let it be confessed that for years the present writer believed that this settled the case -- that the Corinthians spoke in languages that would have been utterly appropriate in the proper congregations but that the problem arose from the cosmopolitan character of the audience. Paul did not allow, for example, a Phrygian to monopolize the time in a Greek service without speaking the language of the majority. Even if he spoke at all in his native dialect, he must first be sure an interpreter was present to insure that he was not wasting the time of the people. Further, on this theory, when Paul claimed to speak in tongues more than they all (I Cor. 14:18), he was simply referring to the linguistic demands of his missionary labors and his own competence, whether by nature or grace, in meeting those needs. Any divine enablements or tongues would be to simplify the witnessing, not to complicate it.

This was a neat and convenient hypothesis. And it was true to the natural meaning of words. The only difficulty is that it seems necessary to ignore certain data if one is to make the simple formula cover all New Testament situations. It is, indeed, safe to say that in Acts 2 and probably throughout the Acts passages "tongues" include intelligent and intelligible discourse. Nothing could be clearer than the statement in Acts 2 that they actually spoke in these other languages and that the power was given them by the Holy Spirit. Tongues were heard and understood as communicating truth. They spoke "the wonderful works of God" (v. 11). They showed more, not less, than ordinary ability in expressing their ideas. So it must be admitted that real language was included at Pentecost. And it was not dependent upon an interpreter. Tongues were a means of communication, not a barrier to understanding. The same seems to be implied in both other Acts incidents. In Acts 10:46 "they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God." In Acts 19:6 they not only spoke with tongues; they also prophesied. Both of these notes are sounded in the record and discourse in Acts 2. It is safe to assume that the writer considered all three cases parallel. All that is known about the three incidents would place them in harmony. Nothing is revealed to the contrary. All appear to be unsought, unexpected manifestations of the Sovereign Spirit. And all included praise to God that edified the hearers or prophecy aimed at human minds and hearts.

But were these events only orderly and systematic discourses aimed at the conversion of the lost? Were there at Pentecost 120 groups of foreigners addressed in as many different places in as many different languages with the net result of 3000 converts? A closer look seems to raise interesting questions. Why, then, did some judge them to be intoxicated (v. 13)? Wine thickens and garbles speech. It does not improve one's ability to express himself. It is distinctly possible, as most commentators indicate, that there was much ecstatic praise offered to God. The order of the narrative seems to imply that the crowd assembled after news had spread of an unusual excitement of some kind (v. 6). It was from this lately assembled group that observers began to identify their native tongues as spoken by Galileans. The natural assumption is that in the absence of an audience, prayer and

praise were vocalized to God within the bounds of rational speech and possibly beyond in ecstatic utterances in which feeling outran the usual limits of human expression. But as people came, the attention of the worshippers shifted to include the comers. They continued to recite the wonderful works of God and to offer praise -- but less as closed circuit prayer and more as a testimony -- though prayer, rejoicing, and thanksgiving were no doubt mingled. Of course, even prayer can be vitally related to a human audience -- else why offer public prayer at all. The impression of the Divine was, no doubt, heightened by outbursts of intelligible speech in these foreign languages as the Holy Spirit enabled them to communicate across language barriers. Those who tarried to listen were amazed, while the others scoffed at such religious excitement as if it had been caused by wine. "How", they argued, "could people be so happy and excited over religion if they were in their right minds."

When the crowd had assembled and had been duly impressed, Peter preached to them. We are not told what language he used. We assume that he spoke in the language known best by the most present, Palentinian Aramaic or Hebrew of that day. His speech alone is recorded, and it is in the form of a summary. It has no necessary relationship to the speaking in tongues. It only interprets the significance of the mighty works of God accomplished that day.

A point needs to be clarified here. Tongues did not stand alone as a manifestation at Pentecost. There were also the sound as of a rushing, mighty wind (v. 2) and the cloven tongues (split darts) like as of fire (v. 3). Tongues, then, were only one of the three phenomena or appearances. None of these three is the central fact of Pentecost that marks a dispensation and becomes the life of the Church. Beyond the transient manifestations or phenomena is the thing itself -- the noumenon. This is simply: "They were all filled with the Holy Ghost." This is the universal gift made available to believers (v. 38). This is a major theme of Acts. This is the key to the Epistles. This is the throb of vitality from then on to the present. Yet we hear no more of the sound as of a wind or of darts of fire in the Scripture and seldom in history. They are unsought and not given. Nor are tongues promoted in the New Testament. And seldom are they experienced in later centuries except as they are taught and sought. Even then it is hard to identify them with the untaught and unsought transient manifestation of Pentecost.

It is also interesting to observe that no reference is made to a "gift" of tongues in Acts. It only says that they spoke in tongues as they were given utterance. If they were ever given such utterance after that day, the Scripture is silent on the point. Nor is there any record that any person was enabled to join himself to a new nation as a missionary on the basis of his new language. If any apostle escaped the rigors of language study in missionary work, we are not so informed. Likewise in later times it is very seldom that authentic cases are found of such a permanent and useful gift of a missionary language. On the other hand, most missionaries have seen the wreckage of folk who went to foreign lands on the assumption that they had such gifts. In any case, Scripture reference to a gift of tongues is not in Acts. It is only in I Corinthians.

But what about the Corinthian passage (I cor. 12-14)? What is it describing? Paul does not leave us in doubt. He is discussing spiritual gifts (12:1). And he is spending his time on the particular "gift" that was most sought, most emphasized, and that had caused the most problem in the church at Corinth. It will be noted that he does not deny it as a matter of fact, nor does he denounce it, nor does he forbid it. But he does spend three chapters to bring the practice into line with Scripture truth and Christian ethics. And here it must be granted that Paul admits standing to a "gift" that is nowhere else in Scriptures so designated or recognized. But let us see what he says about the gift as exercised and abused by the people of Corinth. And at this point let us notice that chapter 13 is not an irrelevant digression. In all three chapters he is analyzing the same problem. Space forbids a full exegesis of the material. Instead, we will give a running exposition and summary in the form

of a loose paraphrase that seeks to express the thrust of the passage. Observe throughout that Paul's complaint is basically that the Corinthian emphasis is not on a sovereignly bestowed gift originating in the Divine initiative and for the sake of edification. The abuse comes by substitution of human initiative for the sake of the spectacular to build the human ego. They sought to mystify the brethren rather than to edify them.

Paul begins: I wouldn't discourage your interest in spiritual gifts (v. 1), though I would remind you that you have a background of being very gullible in religious matters. You used to be carried away by dumb idols in your old pagan, self-centered worship (v. 2). Now in your determination to stand out, you are throwing yourselves open to invasion from without in dangerous ways. Doesn't it frighten you that some have so far skirted the edge of apostasy and demon possession that they have allowed themselves, in the name of the sought gift, to call Jesus accursed? Don't you know that the Holy Spirit could never be the source of that outburst (v. 3)? This is not to deny genuine gifts by the Spirit. He gives not one but many gifts. However, there are not many Holy Spirits. There is but one. The important thing is to be rightly related to Him. And that is not by any preconceived and sought sign. One first submits to Him as Lord. He does the choosing and the giving. We do the receiving and the profiting (vv. 4-7). It is not our prerogative to choose our gift. The Spirit does that. But it doesn't matter whether I receive wisdom, knowledge, faith, healings, miracles, prophecy, tongues, or interpretation. All are works of the same Spirit, sovereignly given according to His will. I must obey and be content (vs. 8-11). It is as in a body. Life is not a talent contest. It is a participation. Even survival demands cooperation. Then use your gifts as God has given them to you (v. 20) and don't worry if someone else's gift gains the limelight (vv. 29, 30). Of course it is proper to desire earnestly the best and most useful gifts (v. 31), but don't let even that disturb you. I show you a still better way. The ethical and spiritual are higher than the miraculous in value.

(Chapter 13 then is a series of contrasts between the self-seeking use of tongues and the ethical value of love -- the fruit of the Spirit.) Tongues, however Divine and spectacular, are mere clatter without love (v. 1). Even charismatic gifts of knowledge and power are inferior to ethical love (v. 2). Nor can extravagant sacrifice take the place of pure motive (v. 3). Love exhibits the qualities that are peculiarly violated or displaced by an unbalanced emphasis on tongues (vv. 4-7). Love has a permanency, a survival value that does not belong to tongues or even to knowledge or prophecy (v. 8). There can be something child-like if not downright childish about seeking tongues (vv. 9-11). Maturity, when it comes, will not be by display of prowess but by the Christian virtues -- the fruit of the Spirit (vv. 12, 13). (At least it is better to interpret chapter 13 in context than to make it an irrelevant digression.)

Let love be the main thing. As a means to that end, seek the useful charismatic gifts. Prophecy. That will help your brother. Tongues are for private devotions. They may express mysteries, but no one understands if you use a language that is unknown (14:2-4). Tongues are all right in private. The one case in which they may be used publicly is when there is someone to make them intelligible -- an interpreter (v. 5). Even in the lower animals distinctions of sound are intentional and with purpose. Do you expect less of the Spirit's manifestation (vv. 7-10)? The Spirit is not interested in making a barbarian of you, is He (v. 11)? Your goal must be to edify the church (v. 12). So, if you speak in tongues, seek to interpret. Otherwise save your breath (v. 13). Really, you are not gaining for yourself what you should if you throw your mind into free-wheeling. Prayer is not a passive thing. Let it engage the mind as well as the tongue (vv. 14, 15). An unknown tongue also destroys community of worship. How can one say Amen without knowing what you are saying (vv. 16, 17)? Don't be childish. Wake up and participate in group worship in plain language (18-20). Tongues indicate something to the unbeliever. Maybe not what you think. They may indicate that you are out of your mind. But they surely do not edify saints (vv. 21-23). What are your goals? Do you want

converts? If so, preach (vv. 24-26). But exercise real restraint in tongues so as not to ruin the service (vv. 27-30). Prophecy is better because it is subject to discipline (vv. 31, 32). It is definitely of God and does not lead to confusion. Especially don't let the women go out of bounds and violate all decency and offend fine sensibilities (vv. 34,35). Throw off your arrogance and pride. Submit to discipline (vv. 36-38). Desire to preach, but do not deprive the other fellow of the liberty to speak in languages -- provided only that he does not violate decency or disrupt proper order.

What is the tone of all this? Tongues did not have to be promoted at Corinth. Where pagan Greek mantics had long used frenzy to prove that they were "possessed," the Corinthians were exaggerating and abusing the spectacular for their own self-aggrandizement. Whatever could have been said truly about the emotional excitement of Pentecost was caricatured here. Whatever mystery and obscurity there may have been in some of the praise at Pentecost, there was more here. In their "trumped up excitement", they apparently surrendered themselves without being sure they fell into the hands of God. They threw discipline to the winds and skirted the border of demonism and apostasy at times. At their best, they took public time for mysterious and irritating private devotions. At their worst, they yielded their faculties to undisciplined impressions and actually cursed the Christ they claimed to worship.

It was an emotional experience. It did attract attention. Sometimes at least it involved a psychological catharsis. And it may have helped some feel that they were breaking over the limits of slowness of speech and small vocabulary in prayer and praise. It was probably as close to the sense of the Divine as many had ever come. It may even have had some dynamics for purifying and integrating life. But it was so poorly done, on the whole! How much better to put the emphasis where God puts it -- on the ethical, on discipline, and on helping one another.

However, Paul recognized the prerogative of the Holy Spirit to give a charismatic gift of tongues. It would be wrong to forbid what God gives. Though even that must be under the intelligent discipline of a redeemed intellect and will. If it is of God, it can and must be done decently and in order.

The situation is complicated today as in Corinth by the constant danger of too much of the Corinthian type of humanly-induced, ego-promoting substitute for genuine work of the Spirit. This makes it difficult to measure the extent of the real and proper. There is no clear evidence in the New Testament that tongues were a frequent accompaniment of the fulness and power of the Holy Spirit. Nor do we know that it was extremely rare. It must be observed that Paul claimed to speak in tongues (14:18) and told the Corinthians not to forbid the practice (14:39). But in Paul it was subject to discipline and purpose -- much as prayer and free worship are in the less liturgical settings.

One big question that remains is: How strictly "language" did tongues have to be? Most encyclopaedia articles and commentaries, probably copying the same sources, seem to indicate that language, as intelligible speech, was a minor consideration. To them tongues would be ecstatic utterance of meaningless syllables -- often without even a knowledge of what they were doing or saying. The analogy is of the "possessed" Greek mantic -- doing and saying what some "daemon" actually motivated in him. And this is a phenomenon observed around the world in all ages in one way or other. Part of the explanation may be psychological for this sort of thing. But the human may, in theory at least, be yielded to the Divine or the demonic.

There are many who deny that tongues are simply incoherent ecstatic utterances. Kelsey in his book Tongue Speaking insists that there is adequate documentation of not only intelligent language but of beautiful discourse in a language that one has never learned. And he insists that once one has the "gift" he can call it back into use at will, without any emotionally charged environment. He cites significant testimony, though he does not speak in tongues himself. Coherent language is

illustrated by various authors from normal, sincere, Christian situations, from cases of admitted demon possession, and from those under great emotional or physical stress. Others go to considerable length to explain away any real language ability and to show the childish qualities of such speech as remains. A most interesting instance is cited by Dr. V. Raymond Edman in the Christian Herald, May 1964, page 14 in the article "Divine or Devilish", where a group of outstanding linguists analyzed "tongues" on tape and concluded that they could hardly be any existing human language. It was simply called a form of ecstatic speech. The present writer is unable to harmonize the data. He simply grants the ability of the Holy Spirit to manifest Himself in tongues as at Pentecost, at Caesarea, at Ephesus, in Paul, and in the early church. He doesn't seek to define how this can be. He does grant that in the Acts account tongues included intelligible speech, whatever else it may have meant. He also observes that in Corinth it seemed to assume less coherent forms, though even there a rational element was present that could be clarified by an interpreter.

The writer does confess bewilderment at the point of the moral purpose of tongues today. It is more evident in the launching of a dispensation in which the accent is on witnessing and on the universality of the Gospel. Since the "gift" is so seldom a real implementation of preaching or witnessing, it is hard to see its value now. Thousands have testified to an edifying experience of glossolalia. But what is its purpose? Is it the emotional release comparable to that produced by the weeping and shouting of our own spiritual forebears? But if so, why such an elaborate divergence from plain English? Perhaps this is part of the reason why it is the least of the charismatic gifts.

One even wonders if the Spirit Himself would very often find occasion today to grant "tongues" if the initiative were left to Him. It is interesting to note that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is practically never accompanied by tongues in modern times except where people have been taught to seek and to expect them. Does that mean that "tongues" now tend to be "Corinthian" instead of Pentecostal? Do they often stress the psychological aspects that are common to pagan and Christian alike? Is there an element of suggestion or even of auto-hypnosis? Are there certain contagious motor responses that account for at least some of the current practice? And all of these questions can be asked without questioning the integrity of any who may have the ability without the abuses.

In any case, no amount of the miraculous can take the place of the ethical. Nothing is more dangerous than to assume that the ecstatic or the charismatic guarantees the spiritual or the ethical. Daniel Steele well distinguished the ecstatic, charismatic and ethical fulness of the Spirit. The flood of divine power may prostrate the body without cleansing the soul. "And there may be enduement of Spirit without life in the Spirit." Fulness of righteousness is distinct from and superior to both the ecstatic and the charismatic. To reverse the order is to miss the highway of holiness. (See: A Defense of Christian Perfection, pp. 109-110.)

But when all is said and done, the New Testament recognizes tongues and commands us not to forbid them. Yet it does not suggest that they should be sought. If one observed all of the cautions of I Corinthians 12-14, had no motive of self-seeking or pride, and were fully yielded to the discretion of the Holy Spirit in the distribution of gifts, such "tongues" as would remain would edify the saints and would lead none astray. The gifts of the Spirit are "given to every man to profit withal." This we must be ready to accept with joy if the Sovereign Spirit sees fit to give. But we are equally obliged to beware of the "Corinthian" abuses and to submit to the discipline of the Spirit. Judging from Scripture and history, this approach would keep tongues at a minimum in the church. The general rule seems to be that where they are not sought they are not experienced. And, besides, what can tongues add to one who already has the fulness of the Spirit? The Spirit himself bears witness. The important thing is to be sure that we have the fulness of the Spirit that is promised in Acts 2. Having Him, vitally, consciously, and dynamically, we can safely let the Holy Spirit himself choose the manifestations. It is not always a holy generation that seeks after a sign.