

Speaking in Tongues

The gift of speaking in tongues has been called the biggest friendship and fellowship buster of the 20th century. Such should not have been the case in that century, nor should it continue to be the case in the 21st century. Love and unity should rule God's church family, but the gift of tongues used improperly or taught about erroneously can cause such division.

The modern tongues movement began in Los Angeles in 1906 at what has become known as the Azusa Street Revival. It was at this meeting and following that modern believers began to speak in tongues. Some claimed that this event was the beginning of God pouring out his Spirit on his people in the "last days" (Joel 2:28). As the practice spread among American Christians, denominations struggled to determine if the practice was of God or of Satan. In the end, several new denominations were formed (Church of God, Assembly of God, etc.) and the divisiveness of the 1960's - 80's has settled down.

However, modern experiences such as the Azusa Street Revival should never override the truth of scripture. We come to understand scripture in the light of our spiritual experience, but we should never reinterpret or contradict scripture because of our experience. So, let's take a look at what the Bible says about the gift of tongues.

The first instance of tongues is recorded in scripture in Acts 2:1-11:

Acts 2:1-11 (NASB)

¹ AND when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. ⁵ Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were bewildered, because they were each one hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and marveled, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ "And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?" ⁹ "Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our *own* tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God."

It was the day of Pentecost and thousands of people from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. The miracle that clearly occurred here was that the Holy Spirit empowered believers to speak in other languages so that non-believers would see God being glorified and the gospel could be spread to all nations. Clearly, in this instance, the gift of tongues was the ability to speak in a known language that had never been studied or learned, with the goal of rapidly spreading the gospel.

There are other instances recorded in Acts of people coming to faith in Christ and speaking in tongues (Acts 10:46; 19:6). Though the first instance of speaking in tongues was clearly speaking in another known language, later instances required an interpreter indicating that the language was not known, at least known to any other person present. This is where the person gifted with interpreting tongues would exercise his gift so that God's message could be heard (see I Cor. 14).

So, why was the gift of tongues instituted in the first place? Some people put the gift of tongues into a category of miraculous gifts like that of healing and miracles (I Cor. 12:9-10). These gifts, they say, are designed to affirm the gifted person and his message during a special time of God's revelation to mankind. They are designed not to glorify the gifted one, but to glorify God and lead others to faith in Him. Miraculous gifts like miracles and healing accompanied some particular men of faith such as Moses, Elijah, Elisha the apostles and, of course, Jesus. But there were far many more years of time recorded in scripture without reference to these miraculous gifts. Some say that the last era of God's revelation and the last need for such miracles was during the days of the apostles. For this reason, some scholars deny the continuing existence of these gifts while others say they may exist, but with a far more limited use today.

It should be noted that we are cautioned about misusing or misperceiving the purpose of these gifts. We should not be a people who need a "sign" to believe. We should keep the focus on the cross, the reason for Jesus' coming. I Cor. 1:22-23 gives this warning, "²²For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; ²³but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness..." We should not glorify the human using the gift (Acts 14:14-15, 17). We should view the purpose of the gift as glorifying God and leading people to faith in Him as was the case at Pentecost (Acts 2:6, I Cor. 14:2-5).

Paul recognizes the divide that the gift of tongues can create. Apparently, the problem already existed in Corinth. Therefore, Paul addresses the issue in I Cor. 12-14. From this passage, we can derive several principles and standards of conduct.

- The gift of tongues is a valid gift for today. This gift was being practiced in the church at Corinth and there is no firm biblical support that such activity is not appropriate for today. However, there may be enough biblical support to warrant deemphasizing the gift based on the fact that such gifts were mainly prominent during times of new revelation and that I Cor. 14 stresses the priority of prophecy over tongues.
- The gift of tongues is not as important as the gift of prophecy. Tongues does not as readily build up the church body like prophecy. Tongues tends to focus the attention on the one exercising the gift. Five words of prophecy is as good as then thousand words in tongues (v.19)
- Tongues is a sign to unbelievers (v. 22).
- Speaking in tongues should be done in an orderly manner and should not be divisive (vv. 26-33). Only two or three people should speak in tongues at one meeting. No one should speak unless there is an interpreter. Confusion and disorder is a sign that the practice is being abused.

Finally, some people believe that speaking in tongues is a necessary evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit. They point to passages in Acts (2:4; 10:46; 19:6) where the gift of tongues is closely linked with the filling of the Holy Spirit. In other passages in Acts where the filling of the Holy Spirit is mentioned but speaking in tongues is not, they state that speaking in tongues is assumed. Such interpretations are dangerous especially when making a case for an absolute scriptural principle. There are several scriptural instances where people accepted Christ but there is no mention of tongues (e.g., Acts 2:37-42; Acts 8:36-39). Furthermore, the author of Acts wrote the book as a description of the events of the early church. It is not good biblical interpretation to view its contents as prescriptive like the more teaching-oriented epistles. There is no New Testament passage in Acts or the epistles that teaches that all believers will speak in tongues. In fact, the teaching of I Cor. 12:29-31 teaches that not all believers have the gift of tongues.