



Grace Community Bible Church

ELDER'S PERSPECTIVE SERIES

The Gift of Tongues

The Elder's Perspective series articulate key biblical and theological convictions of the Elders at Grace Community Bible Church.

THE GIFT OF TONGUES

In today's church one point of discussion that inevitably comes up is the issue of "tongues." What are they? Are they active today? What is this modern manifestation of tongues? Should we speak in tongues? These and many more questions abound in the minds of believers concerning this hotly debated issue – but most questions arise simply from not understanding the Biblical issues concerning tongues and because of the influence and teaching of ignorant, unbiblical men on both sides of the issue. We have both the modern-day Pentecostal and charismatic preacher who practices a totally suspect hermeneutic and who embraces a liberal approach to Scripture yet who speaks with an authority that is not his saying, "tongues are a sign of genuine faith..." and we have the conservative yet shallow preacher who dismisses the issue as too hard to handle.

What are we to think concerning tongues? Where are we to turn?

Well, the first point of call in this debate that must 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 in its intended context using a historical and grammatical hermeneutic 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 are 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. Tongues as it is used in the Bible is the Greek word "glossa" which has the simple meaning: "an organ of speech; 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 (Gk glossa) - 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 Greek, 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 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 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?"*

CONCLUSION

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. They understood the language Acts 2:8.

TONGUES AS A PROOF OF SALVATION

The incident in Acts 2 was also the first occurrence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. If tongues refer 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.

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 occur 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 were 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 refer 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 careful sifting the experience through the Scripture.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CARELESS 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! We must therefore conclude that the words have no meaning and are just sounds. That is all it is.

HISTORY OF TONGUES MOVEMENT

TONGUES BEGAN ON PENTECOST

In Acts 2, tongues were a "visible sign" to the Jews that the Apostles and believers were indwelt with the Holy Spirit. The tongues that were spoken were "known languages" of that day. (Acts 2:1-13).

TONGUES SPOKEN BY GENTILES

While Paul was preaching the Gospel at the home of Cornelius the gentiles who heard the message began speaking in tongues (other known languages) and the Jewish believers who were present were astonished that even the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 10:23-48).

TONGUES LISTED AS A SPIRITUAL GIFT

Paul in writing to the Corinthian Church, gives a listing of the valid Spiritual Gifts for that day and Tongues is the last listed (1 Cor 12:4-11).

TONGUES MISUSED IN THE CHURCH

Paul rebukes the Corinthian Church for an apparent misuse of the Gift of Tongues in the Church and gives some guidance on the proper use of the gift (1 Cor 14:1-40).

TONGUES DECLARED TO SOMEDAY "WILL CEASE"

The Scriptures reveal that a day would come when tongues would "will cease" (1 Cor 13:8). They would stop in and of themselves. That is, no outside force would cause them to cease. The verb translated "will cease" is the Greek word "pauo" which has the clear meaning that the activity will stop permanently and they would never start up again. They will "cease" by no external action or event; rather, tongues will "die out" on their own.

TONGUES CEASED TO BE MENTIONED IN SCRIPTURE

The gift of tongues does not appear in Scripture after Paul's discussion of their misuse in his first letter to the Corinthians. There is one other mention of tongues chronologically in the Bible but appears in the textually unsound and contestable passages of Mark 16:9-20. These verses do not appear in the two most reliable early manuscripts of the gospel and most likely were added by a scribe.

EARLY CHURCH FATHERS DID NOT MENTION TONGUES AS VALID IN THEIR DAY

1. Clement of Rome - wrote a letter to the Corinthians in 95 A.D. discussing all of their spiritual problems. Tongues were never mentioned.
2. Justin Martyr - compiled a listing of spiritual gifts active in his time (A.D. 100-165) and did not include the gift of tongues.
3. Origen - never mentioned tongues and even argued that the "signs" of the Apostolic Age were temporary and that no contemporary Christian exercised any of these early "sign" gifts. (A.D. 185-253).
4. Chrysostom - writing on 1 Corinthians and the gift of tongues said, "This whole place is very obscure; but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by the cessation, being such as then used to occur, but now no longer take place." (A.D. 347-407).
5. Augustine - comments on Acts 2:4: "In the earliest times, 'the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spake with tongues,'. . . These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit . . . That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away."

SUPPOSED OCCURRENCES OF TONGUES SINCE THE APOSTOLIC AGE

1. Montanus and Tertullian - During the period of the early church the only people who were reported to have spoken in tongues were the followers of Montanus and Tertullian. Montanus, a recent convert, claimed to be the spokesman for the Holy Spirit. He believed that Christ would soon set up the Kingdom in the city of Phrygia, and tried to justify speaking in tongues as an occurrence of the end of the age. Montanus was expelled from the church as a heretic. Tertullian was a disciple of Montanus who advocated speaking in tongues as well. He lived from A.D. 150-222. (After Montanus and Tertullian, the next eruption of tongues was not until the late seventeenth century.)
2. The Cevenols - The gift of ecstatic utterance was claimed by a group of persecuted Protestants in southern France around 1685. They believed that their little children, who knew only the local dialect, were able to speak in perfect French while in a trance. The group was soon discredited because of their night raids and military reprisals against their enemies. And because all their prophecies went unfulfilled, they were branded as heretics and not considered to be a part of Mainline Christianity.
3. The Jansenists - Around 1731, a group of Roman Catholic reformers called the Jansenists, were holding night meetings at their leader's tomb during which they supposedly spoke in ecstatic languages.
4. The Shakers - The Shakers were followers of Mother Ann Lee, who lived from 1736-1784. She regarded herself as the female equivalent of Jesus Christ--God in a female body. She founded the Shaker community in Troy, New York, and claimed that she had received a revelation from God that sexual intercourse was corrupt . . . even within marriage. It is said that in order to teach her followers to mortify the flesh and to resist temptation, she instituted the practice of men and women dancing together in the nude while they spoke in tongues.
5. The Irvingites - About 1830, Edward Irving started a little group in London known as the Irvingites. This group began to speak in tongues but was soon discredited for several reasons: Their revelations contradicted Scripture, their prophecies went unfulfilled, their supposed healings were followed by death, there were rumors of immorality, and some of their leading members were accused of fraud.

THE PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT

Tongues became a part of mainline Christianity in 1901 at Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas. Agnes Ozman received what she called "the baptism of the Holy Spirit" accompanied by speaking in tongues.

THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

In 1960, in Van Nuys, California, the modern Charismatic movement began in an Episcopalian church. It soon spread across mainline denominations of all kinds.

Today the Tongues movement has taken hold in nearly all denominations. There are Evangelicals, Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and even Mormons claiming the "unity of the Spirit" through the Charismatic movement.

Never have we seen such a unifying of the separated denominations as we have seen in recent years.

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.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER CHARISMATIC 'MANIFESTATIONS'?

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 of God 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 God's Word.

CONCLUSION

It is important to be very careful not to become subjective in the pursuit of the truth. It is also important to allow God's Word alone 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 it must be avoided at all costs. Thus, we conclude that from the end of the apostolic era to the beginning of the twentieth century there were no genuine occurrences of the New Testament gift of tongues. They had ceased, as the Holy Spirit said they would (1 Cor. 13:8). The gift of tongues is not for today.



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