



Tongues from Heaven

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*Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts,
but rather that ye may prophesy.*

—First Corinthians 14:1

Two kinds of tongues

The experience of tongues is commonly practiced in many churches and Christian organizations. People belonging to Catholicism, Pentecostalism, nondenominational organizations, and some traditionally conservative denominations are involved in the tongues movement. Others are wondering what to think about the experience of tongues.

When the Bible speaks of tongues, it is referring to one of two things, either the physical muscle in your mouth or the verbal mode of communication by a language. The tongues issue being addressed is concerned with the phenomenon of speaking in other languages without first acquiring the knowledge of how to speak those languages.

Two kinds of tongues (languages) are referred to in the Bible: biblical tongues and Corinthian tongues. The first kind of tongues is described in the book of Acts. The second kind of tongues is discussed in First Corinthians. Biblical tongues and Corinthian tongues are not the same.

Biblical Tongues

There are three incidents of people speaking in tongues recorded in the book of Acts. In each case, God used the ministry of tongues as a sign-gift to teach Jews important truths about the new covenant between God and His church. In the first incident, God used the tongues experience as a sign to the Jews to indicate that the church was His newly approved house of witness. This incident served as a precedent for the next two experiences of tongues. In the second incident, God used the sign-gift of tongues to indicate that Gentiles were to be included in the new house of witness as full participants. The third incident was a sign showing that God's church was the only recognized authority and representative to baptize Christians. We will

look at each of these incidents of tongues to gain insight into how we should think about the gift of tongues.

Acts 2:1-11

Acts 2:1-11 presents the first account of believers who experienced the gift of tongues. Verse one tells us that all of the disciples were gathered together in one place and in one accord. There were about one hundred twenty disciples assembled during this time according to Acts 1:15. They were probably in prayer (Acts 1:14). All was quiet and peaceful yet intense with earnest prayers and supplications to God.

Then suddenly, there was a sound like a great wind, and it filled the entire house where the disciples were sitting. As they looked around at each other wondering what was happening, they noticed what appeared to be flames of fire over their heads in the shape of cloven tongues. Then, they began to speak in other languages (tongues).

Verse four explains that this event was associated with being filled with the Holy Ghost and that the disciples were speaking in tongues as the Holy Ghost gave them utterance. This was the day that Jesus spoke about a few days earlier (Acts 1:5). He told the disciples that, "John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence." And in Acts 1:8 Jesus said, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." The experience of tongues was the beginning of the church's Holy Spirit empowered witness to the world. This was a sign to the Jews that God's new house of witness was divinely approved and ready to minister.

The Pentecost experience was consistent with God's earlier precedents of empowerment and approval of His house of witness. When the tabernacle was completed and ready for use in Israel, Exodus 40:34-35 tells us that the cloud of the Lord covered the tent and that the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. God used this visible manifestation as a sign to the Jewish people that He accepted the tabernacle and was with them in a special way. Likewise, when the temple in Jerusalem was completed under King Solomon's leadership, First Kings 8:10-11 tells us that the glory of the Lord filled the temple, and the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud. Again, this was a visible manifestation and a sign to the Jews that God approved of the temple. The manifestation of the Spirit of God, in a

miraculous manner during the Pentecost feast, was a clear indication to the Jews that God was there in a special way, approving His new house of witness—the church.

Acts 2: 5-11 describes to whom the disciples were witnessing and the response of these people to the disciples' message. Most importantly, all the listeners understood what the disciples were saying. During the feast of Pentecost, which was the feast of harvest, all able-bodied, male Jews were expected to participate. Jews from every nation under heaven were in Jerusalem. This included Jews who were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, dwellers in Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and parts of Lybia. There were Cretes and Arabians, people from Rome, and proselytes. There were thousands of Jews gathered in Jerusalem representing hundreds if not thousands of languages and dialects.

Miraculously, the disciples publicly preached the wonderful works of God in all of the dialects represented in Jerusalem at the time (verse eleven). Verses six and seven tell us that the multitude of people were taking note of the disciples' multiple language abilities and were discussing among themselves how unusual this was. The disciples were preaching the message of God throughout Jerusalem in many languages all morning. Verses fourteen and fifteen show Peter explaining to a crowd that the disciples were not drunk as some supposed. It was too early in the day for that, being only the third hour. Peter explained that what they were witnessing in the disciples was the fulfilling of Joel's prophecy.

The Jews were amazed by the way the languages were being heard (verse seven). Each disciple, though natives of Galilee, presented God's message in each of the dialects of those listening. It was common for people to speak several languages, but the disciples were speaking each of the dialects of the listeners (verse eight). This means that the disciples were speaking with all the slang, phrases, and words unique to each little village or community represented by the thousands of Jews from all over the world. That's a miracle! The Jews realized that they were witnessing a miracle and were amazed. The disciples were not trained in all those languages and dialects. They had not visited most, if any, of the communities being represented. God had enabled them to miraculously communicate and witness to every person visiting Jerusalem. Even more miraculous, the description of the event suggests that each listener could understand a single disciple at the same time in each their own dialects. In other words, as a disciple

spoke, God was translating the message into each dialect of those listening.

Thus, Acts chapter two records several important facts about the Pentecost experience of biblical tongues.

- The sign-gift of tongues was associated with the empowerment of the church.
- The tongues experience was caused by the Holy Spirit.
- The disciples were not in an environment which externally excited people emotionally.
- The disciples were not trying to self-induce the tongues experience, but spoke only as the Spirit of God gave them utterance.
- All of the listeners were hearing and understanding the witness of God's wonderful works.
- The disciples spoke in the dialects of those who were listening.
- Jewish people were witnessing this manifestation of the Spirit.

Acts 10:44-48

The second incident in Acts of people speaking in tongues is recorded in Acts 10:44-48. While the Apostle Peter was speaking to certain Gentiles, they began to speak in tongues. Verse forty-four explains that this was because the Holy Ghost had come upon them. The Jews, who were with Paul, were astonished because the sign of tongues was manifested in the Gentiles. However, recognizing the association between the sign-gift of tongues and church empowerment, Peter responded in verse forty-seven by saying, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" Peter's command to baptize the Gentiles with water shows that he understood that God wanted them to be included in the church. Later, Peter describes this incident to the Jews at the church at Jerusalem saying in Acts 11:15-17, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?"

Obviously, Peter and the Jews were resistant to the idea of Gentiles being baptized and added to the church. Jews did not believe that Gentiles were worthy of entering into a special covenant with God, namely, the house of witness. The Jews were God's special people. Even Jesus referred to the Gentiles as dogs in Matthew 15:21-28. Under the old covenant between God and Israel, Gentiles could be saved, but they were not allowed full privileges in the house of witness (Matthew 23:15). The Jewish Christians could not imagine allowing Gentiles into a sacred institution. Thus, the Jews were astonished when the Gentiles manifested the gifts of tongues because it was a clear indication from God that the Gentiles were to be included in the house of witness.

God had prepared Peter for this encounter with the Gentiles with an unusual vision. Acts 10:1-23 explains that while a God-fearing Gentile named Cornelius was praying, Peter, waiting for a meal to be served, went into a trance. In a vision, Peter saw all kinds of animals which were considered unclean by Jewish people. But the Lord told Peter to eat the unclean animals. Peter refused saying, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" (verse fourteen). God responded, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." This vision occurred three times. While Peter pondered what the vision meant, the Spirit of God directed him to go visit Cornelius the centurion. It was during this visit that God showed Peter that Gentiles were to be included in the church. The Gentiles were no longer to be considered unclean.

From this tongues experience several facts should be noted.

- The sign-gift of tongues indicated that Gentiles were to be included in the church.
- The tongues experience was caused by the Holy Spirit.
- The manifestation of tongues in the Gentiles was a sign to the Jews witnessing the event.
- The Jews heard and understood the Gentiles magnifying God.
- The Gentiles were not trying to self-induce or seek for the tongues experience.
- The Gentiles were not in an environment designed to produce an emotional response.

Acts 19:1-6

Acts 19:1-6 records the third and final account of people supernaturally speaking in other languages. In this account, the Apostle Paul meets certain disciples in Ephesus, undoubtedly associated with Apollos (Acts 18:24-25). After talking to them, he realized that they were lacking something, so he asked them in verse two, “Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed”? They responded that they had not. Paul’s next question shows what the problem was. He asked them, “Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, unto John’s baptism.” There was a problem with their baptism. Paul did not ask if they were saved. He did not ask if they believed. The problem was not with their salvation. The problem was with their baptism. They had not received the Holy Ghost referred to by Jesus in Acts 1:5 and by Peter in Acts 11:16, which signified church empowerment. They were not properly baptized. These “certain disciples” of Apollos had the same problem that Apollos had. Acts 18:25 tells us that Apollos was a man “instructed in the way of the Lord; and fervent in the spirit,” however, he knew only of John the Baptist’s baptism.

Paul’s response to this problem was to baptize them again, but this time by the authority of Jesus Christ properly represented in His new house of witness, the church. Paul laid his hands on the disciples after baptizing them to demonstrate and emphasize the importance of being baptized by the proper authority. God requires that baptism be done the way He says to do it. By granting the sign-gift of tongues to the newly baptized disciples, God showed that He approved of Paul’s water baptism of the new covenant in contradistinction to John’s of the old covenant.

It is worth noting here that Acts 18:24 points out that Apollos was a Jew and was ministering to Jews in the synagogue. Therefore, the certain disciples which were speaking in tongues were Jews. Their tongues experience was a sign-gift from God that church empowerment by the Holy Spirit is acquired only after being properly baptized by a recognized authority of the church. John the Baptist’s baptism was valid only until Jesus nullified His covenant with Israel. John’s authority from God was sanctioned under the old covenant with Israel. John was fully qualified to participate in authorized priestly activities according to Jewish law because he was in the lineage of Levi and, more specifically, the lineage of Aaron. His father Zachariah was the priest responsible for burning incense in the temple when God announced that John would be born (Luke 1: 5-13). However, the Jewish

nation lost their authority as God's house of witness when Jesus announced to the Jewish leaders in Matthew 23:38, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." Prior to this time, in John 2:16 and in Matthew 21:13, Jesus said the temple was His house. But, during the week of the crucifixion, He said it was their house and that it would be desolate of His presence. Because they rejected Him, He rejected them, and He built a new house of witness with a new covenant. This new institution was the church as described by Jesus in Matthew 16:18.

Therefore, John's baptism was valid only as long as Israel's covenant with God was valid. As soon as Jesus pronounced that the temple was desolate of His presence, John's baptism was no longer valid. Anyone baptized with John's baptism after this time would not be recognized by God as being properly baptized as was the case with Apollos and his disciples.

Points to note about the tongues experience in this passage are similar those already mentioned.

- The sign-gift of tongues indicated that God's proper authority for baptism is in the church.
- The tongues experience was caused by the Holy Spirit.
- The manifestation of tongues was a sign-gift to the Jewish disciples.
- The Jewish disciples were not trying to self-induce or seek for tongues.
- The Jewish disciples were not in an environment designed to produce an emotional response.

Summary of Biblical Tongues

The experience of tongues in all three incidents recorded in the book of Acts was always used as a sign to Jewish people to teach them something important about the church—its approval by God, its empowerment, its inclusion of Gentiles, and its authority. In each case, tongues was caused by the Holy Spirit. The languages spoken were understood by those listening, and the people who spoke in tongues did not try to speak in tongues by means of emotionalism or self-inducement.

The tongues experiences described in the book of Acts are examples for us to understand the purpose of tongues and the proper practice of tongues. In First Corinthians, Paul explains more about the

tongues experience. However, he does so in response to the improper practice of tongues.

Corinthian tongues

The Corinthian Church

The city of Corinth was referred to as the "sink of iniquity" because of its wickedness and immorality. In fact, the term *Corinthianized* was coined to describe people who had become morally corrupt. In this setting, the power of the Gospel was demonstrated as souls were saved. Nonetheless, the new Christians required much spiritual guidance and correction. They were subjected to more cultural pressures and conditioning to sin than most. It is not surprising that the Corinthian church was plagued by carnality and ignorance. Paul's first letter rebuked them for their many carnal activities and ungodly attitudes. Problems in the church included division and strife among the members, selfishness, pride, and a lack of discipline (1:11). Paul dealt with such topics as being baptized for dead people (15:29), a man living in sin with his mother (5:1-13), members suing members in secular courts (6:1-7), and the Lord's supper being turned into a party for self-indulgence, gluttony, and drunkenness (11:20-27). Paul says of them in First Corinthians 3:1, "[I] could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ." The tongues experience was one issue that had to be dealt with because of their carnality. They had *Corinthianized* a sign-gift intended for Jews and edification, and made it a tool for self-righteousness, self-importance, and self-indulgence.

Love and Edification

Paul explains how to think about and practice tongues in First Corinthians fourteen. However, he prepares the context for this explanation in chapters twelve and thirteen by explaining that spiritual gifts from God are for edifying others. They are not intended to be used as a means of determining spiritual superiority. The Corinthians were thinking that differences among members were indicators of who was more blessed and more spiritual. Paul argued that a church is like a body, all the parts are different, but all are equally important. Likewise, all church members, though they have differing gifts of the Spirit, are important to one another.

Paul explains in chapter thirteen that love is the most enduring and excellent quality to possess. Because the Corinthians were using various gifts and talents as indicators of spirituality, they were seeking after those gifts which they esteemed to be superior. Paul encouraged them in First Corinthians 12:31 to “covet earnestly the best gifts,” and then he told them that they have overlooked a better way. Paul stated that anything done without the love of God is done in vain regardless of one's sincerity. Thus, he exhorted them to seek the love of God. It endures forever whereas everything else ceases. It makes everything meaningful, and without it, a person will fail to do anything worthy of God. Paul described love as being unselfish, tolerant, kind, and patient. This contrasted with the Corinthians' self-indulgent and self-righteous perspectives of gifts. They were not thinking of serving, edifying, and helping others. Further, because they were more interested in pleasing themselves and in appearing more spiritual than others, they obviously were not motivated by the love of God nor by the Spirit of God. The "gifts" they manifested were self-induced.

First Corinthians Fourteen

In chapter fourteen, Paul builds on the thought that gifts are for love and edification. In verses one through five, Paul argues that they should follow after love, and concerning their desire for spiritual gifts, that they should desire prophecy because it edifies. Paul equated edification with understanding, not with the emotions caused by an experience. The tongues experience practiced by the Corinthians did not edify others because they were speaking in such a way that no one could understand what was being said (verse two). These tongues were selfish, because they did not edify others (verse four). Paul continues and says, it would be great if everyone could speak in tongues, but only if it edified others. Because prophecy edifies others with an understandable message from God, it is a better gift than the tongues practiced by the Corinthians (verse five).

The tongues experience practiced by the Corinthians was not the same tongues experience manifested in the book of Acts. In First Corinthians fourteen, Paul describes a *Corinthianized* tongues experience reeking of carnality, self-indulgence, and self-righteousness. Paul points out that no one could understand what was being said. The biblical tongues, portrayed in the book of Acts, was understood by the listeners, personalized dialects were spoken, and the listeners were edified by the message. This was not the case in the Corinthian church.

In First Corinthians 14:6-12, Paul argues that uncertain and meaningless sounds serve no purpose. There is no true edification or benefit to others when they cannot understand what is being said. Paul

**Paul's thoughts on
Corinthianized tongues.**

1. Gifts from God edify others.
2. Corinthian tongues do not edify others.
3. Therefore, Corinthian tongues are not from God.

says in verse nine that speaking words that have no meaning to the listeners is as useless as speaking in the air. This does not mean that what you are trying to say is not meaningful. However, a meaningful message is meaningless and unedifying to those who cannot understand it. Thus, Paul again makes the point that edification by understanding, not feelings, is what God's gifts are all about. Whatever is done by God's people should edify. Corinthian tongues do not edify. Clearly, if one wants to edify, he is not going to speak in Corinthian tongues. More importantly, the fact that Corinthian tongues did not edify was proof that it was not caused by the Holy Spirit.

Paul told the Corinthians, in a tactful way, that they were not manifesting tongues given by the Holy Spirit. In First Corinthians 12:7, Paul states that “the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.” Because the Corinthian tongues experience was not edifying others, it was obviously not of the Holy Spirit.

The Corinthians were probably self-inducing the experience of tongues as is the practice in other cultures. According to *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, *glossolalia* “occurred in some of the ancient Greek religions and in various primitive religions.”¹ *Glossolalia*, also known as ecstatic tongues, refers to the nonsense babble practiced by both Christians and non-Christians. Even today, ecstatic tongues speaking is induced by means of stimulating intense emotions

and/or provoking a state of rapid speech by repeating words or syllables as fast as one can until he is out of control.

In First Corinthians 14:13-15, Paul personalizes the issue of edification. He says that the speaker of Corinthian tongues should pray to interpret so that his own understanding is not unfruitful or unedified. Paul uses himself as an example and states that when he prays or sings in his spirit, he will also pray and sing with personal understanding of what he is saying. In other words, he would not pray or sing in a language that he did not personally understand. No one should engage in prayer or singing unless they know what they are saying. Paul discourages praying or singing in a language indiscernible to the speaker regardless of how good or spiritual it makes them feel.

In verses sixteen through nineteen, Paul concludes his instruction on gifts of edification by saying that those who practice Corinthian tongues are not edifying others. Again the point is, anything of God is done to edify. Obviously, Paul equates understanding with edification. Speaking of himself, Paul stated that though he spoke in more tongues than all of the Corinthians (a necessity as a missionary who travelled to many countries), in the church, he would rather speak five words that could be understood by himself than to speak ten thousand words in a language that could not be understood. The point is crystal clear. Christians should follow the example of Paul and not engage in speaking in indiscernible tongues. It is better to say just five understandable words than many words that cannot be understood. In spite of how good and spiritual the experience of Corinthian tongues makes one feel, if it is not understood by both the speaker and the listeners, it is not edifying, not of God, and should not be done.

Knowing that his comments would offend the Corinthians, Paul encouraged them in verse twenty to be mature in their understanding and to get over their anger quickly as do children. Because Paul is dealing with carnal Christians, he is very tactful and considerate of how they are feeling. Immature Christians are vulnerable to superseding God's Word with emotional experiences. Subsequently, they are prone to being easily angered when they are corrected, especially when their experience makes them feel good and spiritual.

In verses twenty-one through twenty-two, Paul states that the real

¹*The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1973-1974 ed., Helen Hemingway Benton, Publisher, Vol. X.

purpose for tongues is to minister to Jews. Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11 to explain that God promised to speak to the Jews (*this people*) with people of other tongues and other lips. The tongues experience was to be a sign-gift to the Jews indicating important truths about the new covenant. More specifically, tongues were a sign to unbelieving or ignorant Jews. The three incidents in the book of Acts show the proper ministry of biblical tongues to Jews.

Paul states in verse twenty-two that, whereas tongues are for unbelievers, prophesying is for believers. In other words, the sign-gift of tongues is only used for convincing unbelieving Jews of truths they do not accept, whereas, prophesying is for all believers. As he continues his thoughts through verse twenty-six, he shows how the real purpose of tongues is not congruent with their practice. He gives an example in verse twenty-three which describes the effect of Corinthian tongues on those who are hearing them. Paul's mention of the unlearned or unbelievers in these verses refers to Gentiles. This makes sense for the Corinthian church because orthodox Jews would never consider meeting in an assembly with Gentiles. In Acts 10:28, Peter states the Jewish way of thinking on fellowship saying, "it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation." The effect of tongues on the unlearned and unbelieving Gentile is completely different than on the unbelieving Jew. Paul says that the Gentiles will "say that ye are mad." In contrast, prophesying (proclaiming the Word of God), will greatly benefit the unbelieving or unlearned Gentile to the extent that he will fall down on his face and worship God (verse twenty-four).

Therefore, Paul rhetorically asks, in verse twenty-six, how should things be done? He responds by saying, whatever you do or contribute to the assembly, let it be done to edify. Prophesying edifies. Tongues as practiced by the Corinthians makes one appear foolish, does not edify, and is therefore, not of God.

In verses twenty-seven through thirty-five, Paul instructs the Corinthians to keep the assembly decent and orderly. God's gifts and Spirit provoke edifying orderliness, not confusion. The practice of Corinthian tongues was characterized by a great deal of noise, emotion, and confusion even as it is today. Corinthian tongues of today are characterized by people simulating language with indiscernible babble. Many talk and shout at the same time. The noise in some meetings is very loud.

After having told the Corinthians that they should not do anything that does not edify, such as speaking in tongues that cannot be understood, Paul gives them guidelines to restrain their practice of tongues in the church. Paul did not forbid the practice of tongues because the true gift of tongues was still a valid sign-gift ministry in his day. The Corinthians, being immature and carnal, were not able to distinguish between the tongues of God and the tongues of babble.

To help the Corinthians maintain order and edification in their assembly, Paul gave them guidelines in verses twenty-seven and twenty-eight for speaking in tongues. First, there was to be a minimum of two and not more than three people who spoke in tongues during an assembly. Second, they needed to speak one at a time. Third, an interpreter (one who understands the language) had to be present. If there was no one present to understand the tongues, then the tongues speakers were to be quiet. These guidelines would definitely limit unedifying noise and confusion.

Paul's guidelines for the Corinthians proves the point that Corinthian tongues were not and are not a gift of the Holy Spirit. There were no limitations on how many people could speak in biblical tongues. On the day of Pentecost, one hundred twenty disciples spoke in other languages. Likewise, there were at least four people who spoke in tongues during Peter's encounter with Cornelius and twelve men who were baptized by Paul. The purpose of Paul's guidelines for the Corinthians was to prevent the outbreak of disorder because it was not caused by the Spirit of God. Corinthian tongues is a self-induced emotional release which is also practiced by non-Christian cultures. Confusion results when people do not restrain their emotions and speech in assembly.

In addition, verses twenty-nine through thirty-one give guidelines for prophesying or declaring the truths of God. Only two or three were to speak while others listened and considered what was being said. If something had been revealed to another person, then the first person was to be silent and allow the second person to speak. Everyone had the opportunity to give testimony of the truths of God whereby everyone could learn and be encouraged.

Because the Corinthians were a carnal, selfish group of people, there were those among them who wanted to speak all the time, denying others opportunity to speak. Paul encouraged them to be considerate of others and let everyone have a turn to share something

about God's truths. Verse thirty states that "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" which means that there should be self-control on the part of each person wanting to share something. No one should interrupt another person and dominate the assembly with the excuse that "I can't help myself, I must speak when I feel compelled to speak."

In verse thirty-three, Paul reinforces the fact that God is not the author of confusion, does not condone disorderly assemblies, and does not provoke people to disrupt an assembly. Whenever God's Spirit is in control, there is peace, orderliness, and edification by understanding.

Paul's next comment in verses thirty-four and thirty-five about women is not derogatory. He recognizes the fact that women generally are more emotional than men, which is a virtuous quality in them. However, it also makes them vulnerable to an emotionally stimulating environment. Women are more prone to engage in Corinthian tongues. Therefore, he tells women not to speak in the assembly.

In addition, women should not be involved in questioning authority or requiring an answer from authorities during assembly meetings. Though this is another topic for instruction, one should realize that women are responsible to represent Christ's bride and men to represent Christ. For the sake of testimony, women should be obedient and submissive, and men should be Christ-like. A good testimony shows that when we come to God, we submit, obey, and not question His will. Men have been given the responsibility to administrate the business of the Lord's church. Thus, women are never to usurp authority over men in the assembly. This does not mean that women cannot sing, give testimony, play the piano, or be engaged in the many activities of worship. Women have a vital role in worshipping and praising God. However, tongues is a ministry of instruction and leadership, and therefore women are forbidden to speak in tongues. In light of this instruction, two important observations should be noted: (1) often, in tongues speaking assemblies, more women than men are speaking in tongues, and (2) women speaking in tongues is evidence that such an experience can be done without the Holy Spirit.

Paul summarizes his argument on the Corinthian tongues issue in verse thirty-six through forty. In verses thirty-six and thirty-seven he challenges those who may object to what he has said by asking if the Word of God originated with them or if it was brought to them. He is

reminding them that he is the teacher and that they are the ones being taught. Also, he challenges anyone among them who considers himself spiritual to confirm the truth of what he has said about tongues.

Verse thirty-eight reveals Paul's attitude to the problem of Corinthian tongues. He says, if anyone does not accept what he has said, then let them be ignorant. Tongues is a divisive issue because the immature cannot distinguish between true edification and spiritual gifts from emotional experiences that make them feel good and spiritual. Romans 14:1 gives us a better insight into what Paul is thinking. He says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." Paul was being cautious on this issue because the Corinthians were immature and needed time to grow and learn. Christ patiently works with all of us to remove carnality and errors out of our lives.

In verses thirty-nine and forty, Paul makes his last plea on the subject to do all things for edification, with decency and order. This would involve such things as sharing the Word of God plainly rather than in the mystery of an unknown tongue. Nonetheless, he says not to forbid tongues so that the manifestation of a true Spirit-provoked tongues experience will not be disregarded.

Summary of Corinthian Tongues

Corinthian tongues was a practice of speaking words that could not be understood by those who heard it or by the speaker. It was associated with carnal, immature Christians and was obviously a self-induced practice. Gifts of the Holy Spirit are given for the purpose of edifying, therefore, Corinthian tongues were not of God. Further, the practice of ecstatic tongues in the Corinthian church shows that Christians can self-induce such an experience apart from God.

Paul cautiously discouraged their practice of tongues due to his concern for them as weaker brethren. In addition, he wanted to avoid eliminating a true manifestation of tongues, so he did not condemn the practice altogether. As with all immature Christians who have a heart to learn and grow, they will mature and eventually grow out of their immature, self-centered activities.

Tongues: Biblical or Corinthianized?

First Corinthians 14:21 and 22 explain that biblical tongues are a sign to unbelieving Jews. Therefore, biblical tongues are always associated with truths that God wants to teach Jewish people. In the book of Acts, the three incidents of tongues was always associated with Jews, the Holy Spirit, and church empowerment. The Corinthians were not practicing biblical tongues. The differences between the tongues practiced by the Corinthians and the biblical tongues observed in Acts are as follow:

Biblical tongues

- Always associated with Jews
- Always associated with church empowerment
- Always associated with a new truth
- Always a sign to unbelieving Jews
- Always associated with the Holy Spirit
- Always understood by those listening
- Always used to proclaim God's Word to others
- Always edified the listeners because they understood.
- Spoke only when provoked by the Spirit of God
- Was never sought by the speakers

Corinthian tongues

- Associated with Gentiles
- Not associated with church empowerment
- Not associated with a new truth to be learned
- Not used as a sign for unbelieving Jews
- Not associated with the Holy Spirit
- Could not be understood by others
- Was not edifying because it could not be understood
- Was not used to proclaim the Word of God
- Was sought for and used to establish spiritual superiority

The tongues experience of today

Glossolalia

The tongues movement today is often referred to as *glossolalia*, which means tongue language and refers to the phenomena of speaking indiscernible ecstatic languages. *Glossolalia* was commonly associated with the Pentecostal denomination, so called, because of their desire to be associated with the tongues experience on the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2:1-11. However, *Glossolalia* is no longer a phenomenon attributed to only Pentecostals. “In recent years, Pentecostalism has been attractive to limited groups of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists and Lutherans. It should be noted that the Eastern Orthodox Church has allowed some *glossolalia* under strict control for many centuries.”² However, the Pentecostals and others have failed to show any similarity to biblical tongues displayed during Pentecost. Indeed, *glossolalia* of today fits the description of Corinthian tongues.

Interestingly, the other epistles do not mention the practice of tongues though they mention the Holy Spirit. This suggests that the Corinthian church was singled out because of its error. As noted earlier, Corinthian tongues have no similarity to the three accounts in Acts. Further, Paul noted several errors that had to be stopped in the Corinthian church. A Holy Spirit induced tongues experience does not need to be corrected of error.

With regard to the continuance of tongues among churches, “Christian writings between 90 and 150 AD, generally dealing with internal life, contain no reference to *glossolalia*. Even in Corinth, where *glossolalia* was a problem in Paul’s day, it seems to have died out before the 90’s.”³ In addition, “apologists, writers who explained Christianity to Graeco-Roman society between 125 and 175 [AD], failed to mention *glossolalia*.”⁴ This suggests that (1) the Corinthians heeded Paul’s advice and discontinued their version of tongues, and (2) that the use of tongues as a sign-gift by the Holy Spirit had ended and was not important to the continuance of the church and its ministries. The ecstatic, Corinthian tongues experience was not and is not a gift of the Holy Spirit.

²Luther B. Dyer, *Tongues* (Daniels Publishers, 1971), p. 105.

³*Ibid.*, p. 24-25.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 26.

Tongues today are not biblical tongues

In an extensive study of testimonies of those who engage in tongues, Goodman summarized the testimonies of such experiences with a quote from a man named, Nohoc Felipe, who said, “the power of the Lord grabs you, and nothing will stop it.”⁵ Those who practice ecstatic tongues today equate the loss of control in their speech with spirituality and the presence of the Holy Spirit. However, this experience does not conform to Paul’s instruction in First Corinthians 14:27 and 32 in which he tells the Corinthians that they can control and should control themselves for the sake of decency and order.

In addition, Goodman’s study reported that most people who speak in tongues seek the experience and that most require a learning period before they develop fluid vocalization.⁶ In the three accounts of Acts, no one was seeking for or trying to speak in tongues. They spoke in known languages as the Spirit of God gave them utterance. Because it was God who enabled them to speak in another language, no learning period was necessary. They spoke fluent languages without rehearsal. Paul said in First Corinthians 14:22 that “tongues are for a sign,” and Jesus warned in Matthew 12:39 that only “an evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign.” In light of this instruction, it must be concluded that the tongues movement today is not of God.

The fact is, the tongues experience of today is similar to Corinthian tongues. In both cases, these tongues are (1) associated with Gentiles, (2) not associated with church empowerment as depicted in the book of Acts, (3) not associated with a new truth to be learned or confirmed by the manifestation of tongues, (4) not understood by others, (5) not edifying to others with an understandable language, and (6) not used as a sign ministry to unbelieving Jews. Thus, the tongues heard today, like the Corinthian tongues, are not caused by the Holy Spirit.

⁵Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues, A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* (The University of Chicago Press, 1972) p. 58.

⁶Ibid., p. 89-91.

Glossolalia is not a legitimate language

“It is extremely significant ... that competent linguists from the American Bible Society and various universities and seminaries have carefully listened to many hours of live and recorded tongues speaking; and to this date, not one single example has ever been identified as any known language, modern or ancient. In the face of this staggering negative judgement, *glossolalia* can only be identified as a language, rather than gibberish, because it does have a rhythm and cadence which are component parts of known languages. Numerous tests have confirmed this much, but none has identified a true language.”⁷

Glossolalia is considered a language only because it has “rhythm and cadence which are parts of known languages.” But this alone is hardly compelling evidence that tongues is a legitimate language. Goodman cited a case example of a forty-six year old women diagnosed as chronically schizophrenic who vocalized patterns similar to those observed in patterns of *glossolalia*.⁸ Her utterances had “rhythm and cadence.” One must conclude, therefore, that unless the *glossolalia* spoken is a known language, as it was in all three accounts in the book of Acts, it cannot be claimed to be a legitimate language from God.

Although there are many claims and written testimonials to the fact that known languages have been spoken, the fact that not once has a known language been verified or reproduced casts a great cloud of doubt to the legitimacy of these testimonials. Many attempts have been made to “prove” that *glossolalia* does include known languages, but such attempts have failed.

The dangers of Corinthian tongues

One of the dangers of *glossolalia* is that it hinders spiritual growth. Many claim that they are growing because they feel so much closer to God. There is nothing wrong with feeling close to God, but feelings should not be confused with a meaningful relationship. A relationship based on feelings is subject to instability. A mature relationship is based on commitment regardless of feelings. *Glossolalia* promotes a feeling-oriented relationship. The high rate of turnover

⁷Dyer, *Tongues*, p. 18.

⁸Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues*, p. 125.

of membership in charismatic churches is evidence of instability and feeling-oriented relationships.

Another danger of *glossolalia* is that it elevates experience over the Word of God. Those who practice *glossolalia* violate the rules Paul gave in First Corinthians 14:27-34. They excuse this by saying that God can do whatever He wants. However, they are ignoring the fact that God will never contradict His Word. This attitude produces poor Bible study habits because they must now interpret the Bible to prove their experience, rather than to evaluate their experience in light of the Bible. In addition, it makes them very vulnerable to the subtle ways of Satan. Without the Word of God, Satan can deceive and lead people away from God by producing “Christian” experiences. The magicians of Pharaoh were quite convincing in Moses’ day (Exodus 7:11, 22; 8:7). Likewise, Jesus stated in Matthew 24:24 that false prophets would deceive Christians.

A third danger is that *glossolalia* encourages self-righteousness and egocentricity. This was evident in the Corinthians. The bulk of Paul’s argument consisted of encouraging them to edify one another and to unite. Instead, there were divisions among them, and they were using the gifts of the Spirit as a measuring stick of spirituality to determine who was better than the other (First Corinthians 12:7-31). Rather than being concerned about edifying others, they were focused on themselves (First Corinthians 14:17-19).

The reason for *glossolalia*

People have a need for God, and when that need is not satisfied, anxiety results. People seek fulfillment and escape from pressures and frustrations, whether spiritual or physical, in a variety of ways including vacations, entertainment, drugs, and religion.

After a person becomes a Christian he still has spiritual needs. He has a need for God’s fellowship, for spiritual food, for the comfort provided by the Holy Spirit, and for fellowship with other Christians. Sincere Christians are looking and searching for a meaningful experience with God and His children.

One man, describing how he and his wife became involved in

⁹Joseph Dillow, *Speaking in Tongues, Seven Crucial Questions* (The Zondervan Corporation, 1975), p. 73.

glossolalia, said, “We had met some brothers and sisters in the Lord who told of finding a deeper walk with Christ through the ‘baptism of the Spirit’ and speaking in tongues. Their experience of ‘more’ was exactly what we were looking for, so we decided to go to a charismatic meeting.”⁹

Unfortunately, many people do not turn to doctrinally sound churches for that “deeper walk in Christ” because they do not see evidence of a meaningful relationship with God manifested in those churches. Jesus said in John 13:34-35, “a new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” Being doctrinally sound is not enough to convince others that there is an abundant life in Christ. In Revelation 2:1-11, Jesus commended the church at Ephesus for being doctrinally sound but threatened to remove their authority as a church because they lacked love. Love is a very important part of the Christian testimony.

Love, in addition to truth, legitimizes our testimony to the world. A Christian looking for a meaningful life in Christ is going to follow those who appear to have a more meaningful life. Though it is unfortunate that so many Christians are deceived by their emotions and appearances, it is the responsibility of doctrinally sound churches to manifest, as well as testify of, God's love. Those who truly love Him will show that love, both to God and to others.

Besides lacking love, many doctrinally sound churches are not feeding and training their members. The meaning of church, for many, involves a one hour, programmed, Sunday service. There is little if any *personal* challenge to grow and to make commitments to serve God. The whole religious experience has become a ritual in most churches. Anyone who reads the Bible would surely recognize that there is something missing today in most churches. Where is the enthusiasm and conviction to serve God? One man observed that there is “an obvious lack of the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit [in churches today] that was so evident in the early days of the church.”¹⁰ Sincere Christians want more than ritual. They want all that Christ promises, including a life of joy, understanding of the Word of God,

¹⁰Robert P. Lightner, *Speaking in Tongues and Divine Healings* (Regular Baptist Press, 1978), p. 19.

empowerment to witness, victory over sin, a personal experience of growth, and fellowship with others who love God and are used by God.

God places in the heart of every Christian a desire to serve Him. Christians want to participate in the work of Christ. They want to be used by God. The tongues movement, though carnal and in error, offers an experience that connects God with man. In their desire to "see" God, people are attracted to the charismatic experience. However, because the tongues experience today is not of God, people pass through the charismatic groups disillusioned and confused. Their search for a deeper walk with God was substituted with a superficial emotional experience. It is imperative that doctrinally sound churches live the life of fulfillment and love in Christ as a testimony to searching souls that a deeper walk with Christ is truly possible.

Some may wonder if Christians can get involved in *glossolalia*. But one only needs to remember that Paul was writing to the Christian members of a New Testament church in Corinth. Yes, genuine, sincere Christians do practice *glossolalia*. Many are looking for that deeper walk with Christ. However, being Christian and being sincere does not legitimize the experience. Only the Word of God can do that. Corinthian tongues and *glossolalia* are not the same as biblical tongues.

Churches have erred by not teaching on the subjects of tongues, miracles, and the Holy Spirit. Many have shied away from the topic because of its association with the charismatic and ecumenical movements. But this has produced widespread ignorance about the importance and the function of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, charismatics, by virtue of their public claims and practice, have become the recognized authorities on the subject. Satan has been given total freedom to distort the true doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Instead of withdrawing from teaching about the Holy Spirit, doctrinally sound churches should be increasing their teaching on the subject. Whenever a truth is attacked, it must be defended quickly, intelligently, and tactfully. Ridicule, lambasting, or poking fun at those who have been deceived is not an intelligent presentation of a truth and rarely convinces anyone of a truth. God said, "Come let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18). People are looking for intelligent answers to their questions. If all they hear is shallow, opinionated ridicule, how can they possibly make an intelligent decision on what to believe? Paul did not treat the Corinthians with ridicule. You cannot minister to people in this way. It shows a lack of love and compassion for those in error. People resorting to such tactics are just as carnal as those practicing *glossolalia*.

The reason for *glossolalia* is due, in part, to the failure of doctrinally sound churches to back up their teachings with a life-style that testifies of spiritual fulfillment and a meaningful life in Christ. As Paul explained so well in First Corinthians 13:2, “though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.”

Carnal, immature Christians are attracted to the appearance of supernatural phenomena. If they are convinced that it is of God, they will get involved. What they need from doctrinally sound churches is to be ministered to, instructed, and befriended. Can you think of a better way to win immature Christians?

Conclusion

Corinthian tongues are not of God. As Paul explained to the Corinthians, all gifts from God edify. The tongues practiced by the Corinthians did not edify because neither the speaker nor the listener could understand what was being said. Feeling good and spiritual did not and does not legitimize the experience. One should keep in mind that *glossolalia* is practiced by non-Christian cultures too. Further, the ecstatic tongues of Corinth did not follow the pattern and purpose of tongues portrayed in the book of Acts and described by Paul in First Corinthians fourteen. The tongues of the charismatics today, likewise, fail to conform to the instructions of the Bible. Because God does not contradict His Word, it must be concluded that the charismatic tongues of today are not of God.

Study Guide

1. What are the possible explanations for tongues speaking?
2. How many incidents of tongues speaking are recorded in the Bible?
3. What did Jesus promise the disciples that they would receive? (Acts 1:8)
4. What would be the result of being baptized with the Holy Spirit? (Acts 1:8)
5. When do you first receive the Spirit of God? (Ephesians 1:13)
6. How does the sealing of the Spirit of God differ from the baptism of the Spirit of God?

The Day of Pentecost

1. According to Acts 1:13-15 and 2:1-4, who spoke in tongues on the Day of Pentecost?
2. What happened suddenly while they were praying? (Acts 2:2-4)
3. Who gave them utterance? (Acts 2:4)
4. Who was dwelling at Jerusalem during this time? (Acts 2:5)
5. What did the multitude hear about and do? (Acts 2:6)
6. What confounded and amazed the multitude? (Acts 2:6-8)
7. How many nationalities were listed as being present? (Acts 2:9-11)
8. Could the tongues being spoken be understood? (Acts 2:11)
9. What was the message being spoken in tongues? (Acts 2:11)

10. What does the word *tongues* mean in Acts 2:11?
11. Why were these Jews amazed to hear Galileans speak in more than one dialect?
12. What did the Jews ask? (Acts 2:12)
13. What did the mockers say? (Acts 2:13)
14. What did Peter say? (Acts 2:14-16)
15. How did God display his approval of the tabernacle when it was ready to be used? (Ex 40:34-35)
16. How did God display his approval of the temple when it was ready to be used? (1Kings 8:10-11)
17. How did God display his approval of the church when it was ready to be used? (Acts 2:1-4)

Cornelius the Gentile

1. In Acts 10:44-48, who spoke in tongues? (Acts 10:23-24)
2. Who heard the tongues being spoken? (Acts 10:45)
3. Why were the believing Jews amazed? (Acts 10:45)
4. What was the sign that the gift of the Holy Ghost had been given to the Gentiles? (Acts 10:46)
5. What is the gift of the Holy Ghost? (Acts 1:8)
6. Why would Jews be amazed by Gentiles speaking in tongues? (Acts 10:14; Matthew 15:21-28)
7. Were Gentiles saved prior to this time? (Matthew 23:15)
8. What was Peter's response to God's sign? (Acts 10:47-48)
9. What did Peter say the Gentiles received the same as they (the Jews) in his later account of the incident? (Acts 11:15-17)
10. What is the purpose of water baptism? (Acts 2:41)
11. Why did Peter associate tongues speaking with water baptism? (Acts 11:15-17)

Apollos

1. According to Acts 18:24-25, who was Apollos?
2. What baptism did Apollos have? (Acts 18:25)
3. What did Aquilla and Priscilla do? (Acts 18:26)
4. What issue did they help Apollos understand more perfectly?
5. In what city was Apollos at this time? (Acts 18:24)
6. Where did Paul find certain disciples? (Acts 19:1)
7. What baptism did these certain disciples have? (Acts 19:3)
8. What did these disciples have in common with Apollos?
9. What did these disciples not know about? (Acts 19:2)
10. What did Paul do after explaining the issue of baptism more perfectly to these disciples? (Acts 19:5)
11. Why did Paul lay hands on the disciples? (Acts 19:6)
12. What was the evidence that they had been baptized with the Holy Ghost? (Acts 19:6)

Summary of biblical tongues

1. What was the sign of tongues used for?
2. Were the tongues spoken understood by those who heard it?
3. What nationality of people were being instructed and amazed in each case?

Corinthianized tongues

1. What is the purpose of spiritual gifts? (1 Cor. 12:7)
2. Why did Paul encourage the Corinthians to desire the gift of prophecy rather than of tongues? (1Cor. 14: 1-4)

3. Though self-edification is not wrong, self-indulgence is. For whose edification are gifts from God given?
4. Could the tongues practiced by the Corinthians be understood by others? (1Cor 14:2)
5. Why would the tongues practiced by the Corinthians be considered not of God?
6. If Corinthianized tongues are not of God, why does Paul say he wished they all spoke in tongues? (1Cor 14:5)
7. What is the benefit of speaking in a language unknown to others? (1Cor 14:6-11)
8. What is the benefit of speaking in a language known to others? (1Cor 14:12)
9. What gifts should be desired? (1Cor 14:6-11)
10. What should accompany an unknown tongue if it is to be edifying? (1Cor 14:13)
11. How did the tongues at Pentecost differ from the Corinthianized tongues?
12. In order to be edified, it is necessary to understand what is said. What did Paul say would be a part of his prayers and songs? (1Cor 14:15)
13. Why did Paul not pray in an unknown tongue? (1Cor 14:14)
14. Are others edified by unknown tongues? (1Cor 14:16-17)
15. Though Paul spoke in tongues, what was Paul's criteria to do so? (1Cor 14:18-19)
16. For whom were tongues purposed? (1Cor 14:21-22)
17. Who seeks for a sign? (Matthew 12:39)
18. Why should unknown tongues not be practiced? (1Cor 14:23)
19. What is necessary for a sinner to repent and worship God? (1Cor 14:24-25)

20. For what purpose does Paul want the Corinthians to assemble? (1Cor 14:26)
21. What are the guidelines for speaking in unknown tongues? (1Cor 14:27-28)
22. Why does Paul give guidelines to speak in tongues that he discourages?
23. Why does Paul state that the spirits are subject to the prophets? (1Cor 14:32-33)
24. Who should not be speaking in tongues or prophesying in the church? (1Cor 14:34)
25. Why are the tongues spoken by women in assemblies not of God?
26. How should those ignorant of biblical tongues be treated if they refuse to accept the truth? (1Cor 14:38)
27. Why did Paul tell the Corinthians not to forbid tongues speaking? (1Cor 14:39)
28. List the differences between biblical tongues and Corinthianized tongues.

Summary of tongues

1. List the characteristics of tongues speaking practiced today.
2. Are today's tongues biblical or Corinthianized?
3. Is it possible to be a Christian and speak in tongues that are not of God?
4. Would Paul have been tolerant of Corinthianized tongues if he thought it was of the Devil?
5. How can you minister to someone who participates in the unknown tongues experience?

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