

BIBLICAL TONGUES?

FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH

Why a whole lesson on speaking in tongues?

Whenever spiritual gifts are discussed, the subject of speaking in tongues always comes up. It may seem strange that we have an entire lesson devoted to this one gift, but the vast misunderstanding and misapplication of this gift makes it a point of controversy and discussion in the modern church.

As believers, who are inevitably charged with discipling and being discipled, it is important that we understand this gift from the Bible's perspective. If we fail to see this gift in light of Scripture, we will fall prey to many different teachings and assumptions about what tongues are, what they mean, and their purpose. Failure to see them in light of Scripture is failure to see this gift through the eyes of God, which is the only opinion that matters.



The Early Church

It may surprise you to learn that "speaking in tongues" was not a normative event in the early church. While it is often assumed that every new believer in the first century experienced this, the book of Acts only records three instances where people spoke in this manner. These three sections as well as Paul's

instructions concerning the gift in 1 Co. 12 and 14 make up the only places in the New Testament that address the subject.

Interestingly enough, the gift is never mentioned or referenced in terms of an evidence of salvation, or a higher spiritual experience.



Tongues in the New Testament

1. Acts 2 - Pentecost - The Jews Receive the Promise
2. Acts 10 - Cornelius House - Gentiles Receive the Promise
3. Acts 19 - John the Baptist's disciples Receive the Promise in fulfillment of John's prophecy - "He will baptize you with Spirit"
4. 1 Corinthians 12 - mentioned in a list of gifts
5. 1 Corinthians 14 - Exhortation to Corinthians to value prophecy (speaking God's word) above speaking unintelligible words.

These are the only instances where the gift is mentioned.

Acts 2:4-6

“And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language”



Acts 10:44-46

“While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God.”



I. Acts 2:4-6

Our first example of speaking in tongues is not difficult to understand at all. The Spirit came upon the disciples on the day of pentecost and they spoke in “other languages.” Yet the Bible itself tells us that the people in Jerusalem, who had come from “every nation under heaven” to celebrate Pentecost, “heard them speak in his own language.” (v. 6)



Strictly speaking, there can be no other interpretation of this text. The disciples were speaking languages that were readily understood by those nationalities which spoke them. The miracle was that the disciples had not learned these languages by human means. Those hearing them said, “And how hear we every man in **our own tongue**, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in **our tongues** the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:8-11).

Notice that the tongues spoken were not an end in themselves. They were a sign to show the Jews that the promise of the New Covenant had come in Jesus Christ.

II. Acts 10:44-46

In this text, Peter has been sent to Cornelius’ house (A Gentile) to preach the gospel. Peter was afraid because entering a Gentile’s house would render him ceremonially unclean. God told Peter in a vision that he should no longer call “unclean” what God has made clean.

Peter preaches to Cornelius and, as he is speaking, the Holy Spirit descends on Cornelius and his family and they began to speak in tongues. The Gentiles were now also included in God’s promise of the new covenant. Notice that the believing Jews who accompanied Peter to Cornelius’ house were convinced that the Gentiles were now accepted into God’s covenant because “they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God.”

How did the believing Jews know that these Gentiles were magnifying God? If the “tongues” these Gentiles were speaking were unintelligible “spirit” languages, the believing Jews would not have understood them. The Jews with Peter knew that these Gentiles were magnifying the God of Israel because they were speaking in a language that the Gentiles didn’t know but the Jews did understand. It is my belief that these Gentiles were speaking in Hebrew, which the Jews could easily discern. This is how they knew that it was Israel’s God who was being glorified.

The point of this event, however, was to give a sign to the Jews that “on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

III. Acts 19:2-6

"He [Paul] said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied." - Acts 19:2-6

In his travels, Paul came across some disciples of John the baptist who had not yet received word that Jesus Christ had fulfilled the prophecies of the Messiah. They were still following John's teaching in Matt. 3:11, which foretold that the Messiah



Matthew 3:11. I baptize you with water, but he that comes after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire:

would come after him and baptize them with the Holy Spirit. They told Paul they were believers, but Paul understood that they had not yet even heard the full story of the gospel. They were ignorant of what Jesus had done. Paul told them the gospel and baptized them in the name and authority of Jesus, who had paid the debt of sin and they received the Holy Spirit.

They began speaking in tongues. Notice that all three

occurrences of tongues in Acts are a sign of the movement of salvation to a new people group. In Acts 2, it was proof God had sent the Spirit on the Jews. In Acts 10, it was proof the Spirit came upon the Gentiles. Here in Acts 19, was the final consummation. The tongues proved that the Spirit of God had fulfilled the prophecy of John. God's salvation had come to all men, Jews, Gentiles, and in fulfillment of all the prophets and John the Baptist.

:30

PROOF OF SALVATION?



Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? If tongues is the evidence of salvation, Paul implied that not all Christians are saved. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

Many groups claim that speaking in tongues is absolutely necessary because it is the evidence that one has been saved. This definitely cannot be substantiated by the Scripture. There are only five places (3 in Acts, 2 in 1 Corinthians) that mention tongues. Paul never mentions this phenomenon in any of his letters to the churches of Rome, Galatia, Ephesus, etc.

If the expression of tongues is so vital to the spiritual life of the church and the salvation of every believer, why is it not mentioned in any Scripture teaching doctrines related to salvation and the Christian life. The only place it appears is the three places in Acts where salvation moved to a new people group, and twice in 1 Corinthians where Paul was chastising the Corinthians for their misuse of the gifts in Church services. Even if you believe the gift of tongues is unintelligible spirit languages, Paul tells us that every believer is not given this gift. (1 Co. 12:30).

I Corinthians 14



I Corinthians 12-14

In these three chapters, Paul chastises the Corinthian believers because they were more concerned with the charismatic gifts than they were with loving the brethren. Chapter 13 is pivotal because it shows the greatest manifestation of the Spirit - love.

1 Corinthians 12:28-30 only mentions tongues in a list of gifts so it is not necessary to examine that text. 1 Corinthians 14 is the only chapter in the Bible to which people may point to prove that tongues are a “prayer language.” *It is possible that this may be the case*, however, I do not think so. Rather than trying to prove or disprove this, it is more beneficial to see what Paul is actually teaching about how tongues should be used in these chapters.

1. Tongues is a lesser or subsidiary gift to such “office” gifts as “apostles...prophets...teacher.” (12:27-30). It is also inferior to love (12:31-13:1).
2. For edification of the body of Christ (for which all spiritual gifts are to be used), Tongues is provisionally inferior to prophecy (proclaiming God’s Word) because tongues require the operation of a second gift to complete it (interpretation). Tongues plus an interpretation equal prophecy (14:5).
 - a. Prophecy is speaking God’s words. Interpreted tongues are also speaking God’s words. If everyone in the assembly speaks the same language, tongues are not necessary. The problem often comes when people want to introduce a “new” message from God.
3. Uninterpreted tongues in the public assembly of the church contributes to confusion rather than edification (14:6-17, 23). Five words of prophecy are better than 10,000 words in tongues (14:19).
4. Tongues may be edifying to the speaker (14:4) though he does not know what he is saying (14:13, 14, 19). He might be edified simply knowing God is working. But prophecy (speaking God’s word) is more desirable than tongues (14:5). It edifies all present.
5. Speaking in tongues was prophesied in the Old Testament (14:21) and is said to be a sign for unbelievers (14:22), but prophecy is more effective in converting sinners (14:22-25). It is also important to note that Paul quotes Isa. 28:11-12 when speaking about tongues in 14:21. This passage in Isa. is speaking about foreign language, not ecstatic utterances.
6. Tongues (like prophecy) should be regulated in the church. No more than two or three should speak in one service and they should not speak simultaneously. They must be by turn and followed respectively by the interpretation. Where there is no interpreter, one must remain silent. (14:27, 28). **This shows that tongues are not an uncontrollable outburst in the Spirit.**
7. These instructions for the use of tongues and prophecy in the church are not just the Apostles convictions but are “the commandments of the Lord.” (14:37).

Can We Agree to Disagree?



When it comes to the issue of speaking in tongues, there are some things that believers may “agree to disagree” on. Some may believe that Paul is speaking to the Corinthians about a secret prayer language, while others maintain that he was instructing them on the proper use of foreign languages used to spread the gospel. There are arguments for and against on both sides. This is an issue that we need not divide over.

That being said, there are some things that we must firmly hold, regardless of what we believe about the nature of tongues.

1. Speaking in tongues is not a necessary evidence of salvation.
2. Tongues does not indicate a “higher spiritual level” in believers
3. Tongues should NEVER be spoken in a church assembly without interpretation.
4. Tongues are not an uncontrollable outburst of speaking.
5. Tongues never indicated a “closer” walk with God.
6. Tongues have never been considered a “normative” event in the Bible or the early church.
7. The first instance of tongues speaking by the Christian church (Acts 2:38) was known languages, not unintelligible utterances.

We may disagree on some things, but these things are facts not up for debate.



What about Romans 8:26?

“LIKEWISE THE SPIRIT ALSO HELPETH OUR INFIRMITIES: FOR WE KNOW NOT WHAT WE SHOULD PRAY FOR AS WE OUGHT: BUT THE SPIRIT ITSELF MAKETH INTERCESSION FOR US WITH GROANINGS WHICH CANNOT BE UTTERED.”

Romans 8:26

Many point to Romans 8:26 to prove that tongues are an unintelligible prayer language. While this view is held by many people, it shouldn't be substantiated from Romans 8:26. Here, the Spirit intercedes for us when we don't even know what we should be praying for. However, notice that the Spirit makes this intercession with “groanings which cannot be uttered.”

The term “groanings” indicates a “sigh” of suffering or beseeching. Also, the verse does not say these groanings are unintelligible (i.e. tongues). It says they “cannot be uttered.” These are groans of our fallen nature which are too deep for words.

This relates to the Spirit's communication with the Father in the spiritual realm in which human utterances (intelligible or not) do not correspond