

WHAT ABOUT SPEAKING IN TONGUES?

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Any Christian in his right mind should want all that God has for him. Furthermore, far too few of us have even begun to realize the inexpressible privilege of having the Holy Spirit of God living within us. Is it possible that the gift of tongues is God's way of awakening us to the Person and power within? Or does the current interest in tongues reflect a well-meant but misunderstood effort to duplicate the experience of Pentecost?

With a loving and thoughtful approach, senior research editor Herb Vander Lugt has written this booklet to clarify what the Bible really says about speaking in tongues. It is our prayer that these pages will inspire a deeper desire to study the Word of God and a deeper love for all of His children—charismatic or not.

Martin R. De Haan II

Managing Editor: David Sper

Cover Photo & Design: Terry Bidgood

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WHAT ARE PEOPLE SAYING?

A Housewife. “I was at the kitchen sink praying for my family when suddenly I found myself praising God in a new language. I don’t know what I said, but I felt God’s presence. I felt warm and clean. I now pray with far more delight than ever before.”

A Company Representative. “I believed on Jesus but had no joy or victory in my life until I went forward in a church meeting to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. At the altar I started speaking in tongues and felt a warm glow as the Holy Spirit came.”

A Registered Nurse. “When I became a Christian, a man showed me how to get started speaking in tongues. I did it for a while, but I never was satisfied with

my experience. I don’t do it anymore. I’m not sure it was wrong, but I’m better off now that I’ve stopped.”

A Former Mormon. “When I was a Mormon, I used to speak in tongues. I thought I was receiving revelations from God. Now that I have received Christ as my Savior, I am convinced that these experiences did not come from God. I think they may have come from the devil or demons.”

An Unchurched Retiree. “I went forward in a camp meeting years ago. I was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. I went to church regularly and had many emotional highs for a while. I drifted back to my old ways as the thrill that came from speaking in tongues wore off. I finally gave up. My only chance of going to heaven is to get saved just before I die.”

A Pentecostal Minister.

“I spoke in tongues when I was a young Christian, but I don’t do it much anymore. It seems that as I matured in the faith I felt less and less inclined toward it. But I still associate it with the baptism of the Spirit.”

A Noted Bible Teacher.

“After spending 7 years studying this question and reading all sides of the issue that are in print, and often spending many hours discussing it with charismatics and trying to evaluate it from their perspective, I am convinced, beyond all reasonable doubt, that tongues ceased in the apostolic age 1,900 years ago” (John MacArthur, *The Truth About Tongues*, Word Of Grace, 1984, p.10).

A Linguist And Scholar.

“Glossolalia [speaking in tongues] as practiced by a composed clergyman before a television audience and that accompanying a

shamanistic seance may seem quite remote from one another, but actually they are different in degree rather than kind. They may be considered extremes in overt behavior on a continuum from sedate performance to hysterical activity within the framework of religious enthusiasm” (George J. Jennings, “An Ethnological Study Of Glossolalia,” *Journal Of The American Scientific Affiliation*, March 1968, pp.9,10).

A Theologian And

Psychotherapist. “There are people who without this experience [speaking in tongues] would never have been able to come to psychological maturity. The experience of speaking in tongues opened them up to the unconscious and to a fuller, though more difficult, life” (Morton Kelsey, *Speaking In Tongues*, Hodden, 1965, p.222).

WHAT IS THE SITUATION TODAY?

Tongues-speaking is a subject of widespread Christian interest.

Pentecostals and charismatics (which include members of mainline Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic congregations) practice speaking in tongues as an evidence of spiritual renewal and devotion. Yet, it's not just a Christian experience. Many in the occult and in Eastern Mysticism, both in and out of the New Age movement, also speak in tongues.

Regrettably, tongues have become a source of confusion and division among many well-meaning Christians. This is partly because some tongues-speakers declare it to be a necessary companion to the

baptism of the Spirit and see Christians who don't speak in tongues as deficient in spiritual experience. But the fire of this controversy is also fanned by an over-reaction on the part of some noncharismatics.

“Regrettably, tongues have become a source of division among many well-meaning Christians.”

The testimonies of tongues-speakers and the writings of scholars who have studied the phenomenon give us mixed signals. On the one hand, men like John Sherrill tell of instances when they have heard people speak fluently in languages they had never learned. On the other hand, linguists and anthropologists who have investigated these

reports have not been able to verify them.

Dr. E. Pattison says that in his study of glossolalia (another term for tongues) he has never encountered anything other than nonlanguage sounds (*Journal Of The American Scientific Affiliation*, Sept. 1968, pp.73-86).

Dr. William J. Samarin, a distinguished linguist, has written, "It is extremely doubtful that the alleged cases of xenoglossia (miraculous speech in real languages) are real. Anytime one attempts to verify them, he finds that the stories have been greatly distorted or that the 'witness' turns out to be incompetent or unreliable from a linguistic point of view" (*Tongues Of Men And Angels*, MacMillan, 1972, pp.112-115).

Anthropologist George Jennings tells of Tibetan monks who, in their ritual

dances, spoke "in English with quotations from Shakespeare and with profanity like drunken soldiers, or in German, or French." He also reports the experience of a scholar who, while studying the customs of North American Indians, took the drug peyote and heard in the Fox language what he knew was being sung in the Winnebago dialect. The words left the mouth of the singers in Winnebago; they entered his ears in Fox. If true, these amazing phenomena cannot be easily explained as the product of the subconscious.

The testimony about tongues today is therefore quite mixed. It neither proves nor disproves the practice of miraculous speech in real languages among Christians. If the tongues problem is to be solved, it must be on the basis of what the Bible says.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT TONGUES?

Though the Bible does leave many questions unanswered about speaking in tongues, it certainly isn't silent on the subject. In this study, we're going to take a look at the New Testament accounts about what was sometimes a miracle and sometimes a problem. We'll see how the Scriptures answer three basic questions:

- (1) What happened?
- (2) How did Paul handle the misuse of tongues? and
- (3) Why did God give tongues?

WHAT HAPPENED?

In any discussion of the subject of tongues, it is important that we have a clear sense of history. Luke, the writer of Acts, records three instances of tongues-

speaking: in Jerusalem just 50 days after Christ's resurrection, in Caesarea 7 years later, and in Ephesus after a period of another 13



years. From 1 Corinthians we learn that tongues-speaking was a practice among the believers in this city, and that it was being misused in the church.

Tongues In Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-13). It was in Spring on our calendar, just 50 days after Christ's resurrection, that our Lord's followers first spoke in tongues. A group of about

120 were in one of the buildings of the temple complex. They were gathered for two reasons. First, they were there in obedience to Jesus who, just before ascending to heaven 10 days earlier, had “commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4). Second, along with thousands of devout Jews, they were there to celebrate the traditional Jewish harvest festival of Pentecost.

Suddenly, the disciples heard a sound like that of a strong wind and saw a fire-like form flicker above every head in the room. Then, by the power of God, they started speaking in dialects they had never learned. The commotion attracted the attention of many fellow Jews who had come from 15 provinces to participate in Pentecost. Many celebrants were amazed as they heard

the apostles speaking in the native dialects of each province.

Luke doesn't fill in all the details. He doesn't tell us how these people were able to pick out their own dialects. It seems that about 120 people enthusiastically declaring “the wonderful works of God” in 15 languages would produce such a cacophony of sound that no one would be able to understand anything. Maybe the Holy Spirit led the disciples to break up into 15 small groups of about 8 people per group. Maybe, as F. F. Bruce suggests, the entire company of believers remained together, shifting from one dialect to another until they had spoken in all 15. One way or another, the disciples spoke in real languages they had never learned, and the listeners could understand them.

We can visualize the scene. The disciples were

overcome by the power and joy of God. The Comforter had come (see John 16:7-14). They sensed His presence. Mysteriously and mightily, their living Lord was just as near as when He walked as one of them. The power of His presence surged through them. They were exhilarated, not by alcohol (Acts 2:15) but by the Holy Spirit. They could not contain their joy. They spilled out into the streets and punctuated the air with their speech. The people who gathered were “amazed and perplexed” by what they saw and heard. And although some Jewish people mockingly said the disciples were drunk (2:13), about 3,000 of them must have been properly impressed or they wouldn’t have responded as they did to Peter’s sermon (2:41).

Tongues In Caesarea (Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-18). The time was about AD

38. The place was the home of a Gentile, the Roman centurion Cornelius. The messenger, as on the Day of Pentecost, was Peter. The tongues-speaking was done by Cornelius and his household as they listened to Peter and believed his message. The hearers of the tongues-speaking were Jewish Christians who had accompanied Peter to this Gentile home. They heard these Gentiles “speak with tongues and magnify God” (10:46). Later, Peter declared that the incident was similar to what had happened on the Day of Pentecost (11:15-18). By speaking in languages they had never learned, these Gentiles showed their Jewish Christian audience that the Spirit of God was including them in “the family of God.” It was a sign to Jewish Christians, who might otherwise have been hesitant to believe that

God would do for Gentiles what He had done for His “chosen people.”

Tongues In Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7). The time was about 13 years after the incident in the home of Cornelius—about AD 51. The principals were Paul and 12 people who are called “disciples.” They had been baptized with “John’s baptism” but were not yet aware that the Holy Spirit had come to indwell believers in Christ. So Paul instructed them, baptized them in water “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” and laid his hands on them. Instantly, “the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.” If this incident was consistent with the other two occasions recorded in Acts, these 12 men spoke in dialects unknown to them but understood by at least some of the people who heard them.

Tongues In Corinth (1 Cor. 12-14). Paul was in Ephesus about AD 53 when he heard that the church in Corinth, which he had founded just a few years earlier, was having a variety of problems. Among the issues to be dealt with was a perversion of the gift of tongues. It appears that the church services were being disrupted by people making sounds that neither they nor anyone present could understand or interpret. We don’t know exactly what was happening. Maybe they were adopting the ecstatic speech that was common practice in the pagan temples. If so, their “experience of tongues” would have been something psychological rather than spiritual. Although we cannot be too certain about this, we *can* be sure that a counterfeit kind of tongues-speaking was present in this church. If not, there would

have been no problem. It is possible that Paul, who wasn't there and had to depend upon reports from others, didn't know how much of the tongues-speaking was the real miracle and how much of it was the nonlanguage psychological phenomenon.

Were the tongues in Acts different from the tongues in 1 Corinthians? There were some differences. In Acts, we encounter only three occurrences of tongues-speaking in a period of 20 years; in Corinth, it was a regular practice in church services. In Acts, we find no indication that any one person had the gift of tongues: at Pentecost it was the disciples (about 120 of them); in the home of Cornelius it was the new converts; at Ephesus it was the 12 who had just been instructed and rebaptized. But in 1 Corinthians 12:10 we read about the *gift of*

tongues and the *gift of* interpretation.

Although we recognize these differences, we need not jump to the conclusion that the spiritual gift of tongues in Corinth was a nonlanguage kind of speaking. Paul in writing 1 Corinthians and Luke in writing Acts used the same Greek word *glossa* in reference to tongues. In

“We need not conclude that the spiritual gift of tongues in Corinth was nonlanguage speaking.”

addition, when Paul wrote about the gift of tongues, he wrote “kinds of tongues” (1 Cor. 12:10), using the term *gene*, which normally depicted family groupings of real languages. And when he quoted from Isaiah 28:11-12

(1 Cor. 14:21), he referred to an incident involving a real language (Assyrian) which was unknown to the Jews.

Because of the extent of the unholy confusion in Corinth, it is possible that for the most part the tongues-speaking in this church was neither a language nor a gift. Such tongues-speaking could have been a well-meaning, heartfelt exercise of worship by immature believers who mistakenly thought they had the gift of tongues. Even though not God-given, it may have produced good feelings of emotional fervor and release in those who spoke. That may be why it became a problem in the church services. Too many believers were preoccupied with well-intentioned but misguided enthusiasm.



HOW DID PAUL HANDLE THE MISUSE OF TONGUES?

In seeking to eliminate the disruption tongues-speaking was bringing into the church, Paul faced a real problem. He couldn't be there personally to stop someone who started speaking with the counterfeit nonlanguage form of tongues. Many Pentecostal and charismatic pastors today are frank to admit that they don't accept all tongues-speaking as God-given and that they

sometimes ask problem people to refrain from speaking. Besides, Paul probably realized that some of the Corinthian believers were well-meaning people who enjoyed the experience. They might have been devastated if told that their tongues-speaking was not from God. Then too, since the real gift was still present, Paul didn't want to give the impression that all speaking in tongues was to be avoided. He wanted to leave room for the exercise of this gift. Therefore, after expressing some pros and cons about tongues-speaking in which he neither fully endorsed nor totally discouraged the practice, he set forth eight rules for its exercise. Here they are as given in 1 Corinthians 14:26-40:

1. Public tongues-speaking was to benefit and build up the body (v.26).
2. Only two or three were

to speak in tongues in a service (vv.27,30).

3. They were to speak in turn (vv.27,30).
4. Tongues were to be spoken only when interpreted (vv.27-28).
5. Discerning people were to weigh the message to determine its validity (v.29).
6. Women were not to speak in tongues (v.34).
7. Tongues were not to be forbidden but to be given a lower place than prophecy (v.39).
8. A proper and orderly atmosphere in church services was to be maintained (v.40).

If these rules were followed, the tongues-speaking, whether real or counterfeit, would no longer bring disruption to the church services.



THE PURPOSE OF TONGUES

WHY DID GOD GIVE THE GIFT OF TONGUES?

Why did God enable people to speak in languages they had never learned? The apostle Paul answered this question by giving us its primary and secondary purposes. He wrote, “Therefore tongues are for a *sign*” (1 Cor. 14:22) and declared that as a spiritual gift it was bestowed on “each one for the *profit of all*” (1 Cor. 12:7).

The Sign Function.

While we cannot find in

Acts a specific statement that tongues-speaking functioned as a sign, we can easily see how it did. On the Day of Pentecost the tongues-speaking was the phenomenon that drew the crowd, and it undoubtedly was a powerful factor in opening the hearts of Jewish people to Peter’s message. It served as a sign, authenticating the apostles as representatives of the risen Christ. We can also assume that it was an assuring sign to the apostles themselves. They could see it as a partial fulfillment of Christ’s promise, “And these *signs* will follow those who believe: . . . they will speak with new tongues . . .” (Mk. 16:17). They may have even taken the fact that they spoke in 15 Gentile dialects as a *sign* that the good news was, as Jesus had said, for all the world (Mt. 28:19; Acts 1:8).

The *sign* function of

tongues-speaking is also quite obvious in the other two incidents recorded by Luke. When the Roman centurion and his household (Gentiles who had not become proselytes of the Jewish faith) believed, they spoke in tongues. They did it in the presence of “those of the circumcision who believed” (Acts 10:45), Jewish Christians. Peter saw this as a sign that these Gentiles were to be baptized because they “have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (Acts 10:47). It was a *sign* to these Jewish believers that Gentiles were fellow-members with them in the body of Christ. The tongues-speaking of the 12 people in Acts 19:1-7 was undoubtedly a *sign* to them that they had received the Holy Spirit (whom they hadn’t yet heard of) and a sign of Paul’s authority to everyone present.

When we turn from Acts

to 1 Corinthians, we find Paul listing tongues among the sign gifts (12:7-11) and declaring, “Therefore tongues are for a sign” (14:22). This gives us a solid basis for concluding that even though tongues-speaking occurred in church services here and was termed a “gift,” it still retained its sign function.

Paul further defined this sign function by declaring that it was a sign “not to those who believe but to unbelievers” (14:22). We can determine who Paul had in mind by a look at the Greek term he used. It is *apistis*, which literally means “no faith” or “without faith.” In the Bible it usually refers to the unbelief of the unsaved—people who didn’t believe, whether through ignorance or deliberate rejection. But it is sometimes used in relation to the element of unbelief that can be present in true believers.

Speaking to His disciples, Jesus said that they couldn't cast out certain demons because of their "unbelief" (Mt. 17:20). He exhorted Thomas, "do not be *unbelieving*, but believing" (Jn. 20:27). The father who believed in Jesus enough to come to Him for the healing of his son said, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24). It is obvious, therefore, that the meaning of the term *unbelievers* need not be restricted to unsaved people. It can take in believers who need special help to increase their faith.

Tongues-speaking on Pentecost served as an assuring sign to the disciples and a credential sign to the nonbelievers by authenticating the apostles as truly representing Jesus Christ. It helped the weak faith of the apostles and the unbelief of many of the Jews who were there. In the home of Cornelius it was a sign for

Jews who had believed but needed an indication that Gentiles too could receive the Holy Spirit and become members of the body of Christ. In Ephesus, the believers spoke in tongues probably as a sign to them about the reality of the Holy Spirit's presence and to others as a sign of Paul's authority. In each Acts account, it was a sign to either unbelievers or to immature Christians.

The true gift of tongues-speaking in Corinth undoubtedly would have served the same purpose. It was a sign to the people Paul referred to as "uninformed or unbelievers" (1 Cor. 14:23). The "uninformed" were probably people who we might call inquirers—those who were interested and sympathetic but had not yet believed on Christ. The "unbelievers" in this instance were likely nonbelievers who came into

the services either out of sincere interest or mere curiosity. Tongues were a credential sign to such people, authenticating those who proclaimed the gospel.

Since the gift of tongues is not mentioned in any other epistle, it is possible that this gift was unique in the Corinthian church because of a special Jewish situation. In Acts 18:1-17, we are told that in founding the church Paul held services in a house next door to the synagogue. Could it be that an unusual number of Jews came in to see and hear what was going on? Apparently Sosthenes, who is introduced as the ruler of the synagogue in Acts 18:17, did. We know this because Paul addresses him as a brother in his first letter to the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1:1). One thing is certain. The primary purpose of tongues-speaking as reported in Acts and practiced in Corinth was its

function as a sign. Yet it soon became mixed and confused with a form of emotional expression.

“The primary purpose of tongues as reported in Acts and practiced in Corinth was its function as a sign.”

Tongues-speaking also may have helped strengthen or develop the faith of believers in Corinth as it did at the home of Cornelius (Acts 10). Paul hints at this in 1 Corinthians 14:4, “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.” The question we must ask is, “How did it edify the speaker? He didn’t know what he was saying.” Paul said of such speaking that the “understanding is unfruitful” (1 Cor. 14:14), the mind receives nothing. The edification, therefore, had to be in the emotional area

alone. Tongues-speaking edified because it was to the speaker a *sign* of God's presence, a *token* that the Holy Spirit was working in his life. Interpreted tongues-speaking, while making known something of spiritual content, functioned mainly as a sign. Prophecy in plain language was far more effective as a means of communicating spiritual truth. The chief value of even uninterpreted tongues was its function as a *sign* of God's presence.

The Edification

Function. While affirming the sign function of tongues-speaking as its primary purpose, Paul also alluded to its edifying effect. It was one of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-11), and as such it was designed "for the profit" (Greek text of 1 Cor. 12:7).

The person who spoke in tongues without interpretation didn't know what he was saying. But he

was built up by the fact that he viewed the experience as evidence of the Spirit's presence in his life. This had some value. Moreover, self-edification, though not the ultimate goal of the spiritual gifts, is a blessing worth seeking. Peter closed his second epistle with the admonition, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). It is right to seek to be edified when our motive is to bring greater glory to God and blessing to others. And we grow stronger spiritually through Bible reading, prayer, obedience, and the exercise of our gifts.

Paul didn't rule out the possibility that uninterpreted tongues might have had some value for self-edification. But interpreted tongues went a step further and brought a degree of spiritual benefit to the church. And Paul never suggested that people seek

the gift of tongues for the purpose of edifying either themselves or others. In this role it was far inferior to prophecy—declaring a message from God in plain, everyday speech. To emphasize this point, Paul proceeded to list seven ways in which uninterpreted tongues were less valuable to the spiritual welfare of the church than prophecy.

1. Speaking in uninterpreted tongues edified only the speaker, not the church (1 Cor. 14:1-6).
2. Speaking in tongues could lead to confusion; prophecy brought illumination (vv.7-12).
3. Speaking in tongues did not benefit the mind of either speaker or hearer; prophecy brought understanding (vv.13-15).
4. Praying in tongues, unlike prayer in a known language, didn't benefit those who heard it (vv.16-17).

5. Speaking in tongues could be an indication of spiritual immaturity—a tendency to prefer the more showy gift of tongues to the more solid gift of prophecy (v.20).
6. Hearing unknown tongues was once a punishment for the Jews because they had despised the plain words of Isaiah (vv.21-22).
7. Too much tongues-speaking in a public service could be a hindrance to the salvation of nonbelievers present; unlimited prophecy could be the means of bringing conviction and salvation (vv.23-25).

It follows that edification through tongues—for oneself or the church—is not its major purpose. Proclaiming and hearing God's message in common speech is far superior and desirable.

MORE QUESTIONS

Why did Paul say he wished everyone could speak in tongues? In the process of making a series of statements showing the limited value of tongues-speaking, Paul wrote, “I wish you all spoke with tongues” (1 Cor. 14:5). This seems to be a strange statement. In the first place, he had already indicated that God had not given tongues to everyone (1 Cor. 12:30-31). Second, it is hard to understand why he would wish that everybody exercised a gift that had so little value.

We won't have difficulty with this statement if we realize that Paul was expressing a statement of personal desire. We often do this. The president of a company, for example, might say to his employees, “I wish

all of you could be making \$100,000 a year.” He knows this isn't possible. But he'd like it to be that way.

Paul did the same thing earlier in this epistle, when he wrote, “I wish that all men were even as I myself” (1 Cor. 7:7). It was his personal desire that all could be celibate because of the spiritual advantages of celibacy. But he knew that God didn't give the gift of singleness to everybody. Therefore he added, “But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner [to marry] and another in that [not to marry]” (7:7). Paul would have liked for all to speak in tongues. The gift had some value. However, just as it isn't God's will to grant everyone the gift of celibacy, it wasn't His will to bestow the gift of tongues on everybody.

Why did Paul thank God that he exceeded

everyone else in tongues-speaking? While listing the ways in which the gift of tongues is inferior to the gift of prophecy, Paul wrote, “I thank God I speak with tongues more than you all” (14:18). This statement raises at least three questions: (1) What did he mean? (2) When did he do all this tongues-speaking? (3) Why did he write this?

Paul was referring to the frequency of his tongues-speaking. He did not say, “I speak in more languages than anyone else.” The word *more* in the Greek language is an adverb, not an adjective. It therefore modifies the verb *speak*, not the noun *tongues*. The idea, then, is “more often” rather than “more tongues.”

When did Paul do all this tongues-speaking? In private? In church? Or in connection with his evangelistic or missionary work? It does not seem

likely that he used tongues as a private or public prayer language. He said he didn’t want to pray without the full involvement of his mind, “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the result then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding” (1 Cor. 14:14-15).

It’s possible that he regularly exercised the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation in church services, but the context suggests that he didn’t. He went to great lengths to show the superiority of prophecy over tongues, even contrasting them. He said that in church he would rather speak 5 words with his understanding than 10,000 words in a tongue (v.19). God’s truth could be expressed far more simply through prophecy.

Since it appears unlikely

that Paul used tongues in private prayer or in church services, it follows that he probably did this in his role as missionary or evangelist.

“In the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding . . . than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

—Paul (1 Cor. 14:19)

To visualize how Paul spoke in tongues more than anyone else, we probably should think of the Acts pattern. Picture Paul introducing a new group of people to Christ. See him, either alone or with others, praising God through dialects they had never learned. This tongues-speaking, like that which occurred on the Day of Pentecost, would be a credential sign for new

believers and for the unsaved who might be present. Since he was the foremost missionary of the first century, he would have occasion to do this more than anyone else.

Why did Paul say that he spoke in tongues more often than the Corinthian believers? Maybe he wanted to show them that his negative statements about tongues didn't originate in his personal frustration. It was not a case of sour grapes or a coverup for his own inadequacy in tongues-speaking.

Did tongues cease before AD 100? They probably did. The testimony of the New Testament and church history strongly point in this direction. The writer of Hebrews used the past tense when he declared that God had confirmed the apostolic witness with “signs and wonders,” “various miracles,” and “gifts of the

Holy Spirit” (Heb. 2:1-4). Tongues-speaking would certainly come under the category of “signs and wonders.” Moreover, church historians have found no evidence of tongues-speaking among the church fathers of the second century. The practice was present only among a few heretical followers of Montanus. And until recent times, tongues-speaking has been unknown among the vast majority of the Lord’s people.

Even though there is good reason to believe that tongues-speaking ceased with the ending of the apostolic age, the Bible doesn’t specifically state that this is the case. Many use 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 to prove that the miracle of tongues-speaking is an absolute impossibility today, but this passage isn’t conclusive.

Some take the words

“when that which is perfect has come” (13:10) to be a reference to the New Testament. They point out that the Greek word used in relation to the gifts of prophecy and knowledge is *katargeo* in the passive voice. They say that these gifts were “rendered inoperative” by the acceptance of the New Testament and that tongues simply stopped (*pauo*) at some point before the completion of the New Testament Scriptures.

Some Bible scholars believe that this verse is referring to the maturity of the church, while others maintain that it is the second coming of Christ. The logic for all these views is good, but none of them can be proven with absolute certainty. I believe that it’s best to see the expression “that which is perfect” as a reference to eternity. It is only then that we will see

“face to face” and “know just as I also am known” (13:12).

In summary, we can advance solid reason for believing that tongues ceased at the close of the apostolic age. But we cannot *prove* that they did on the basis of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

Is tongues-speaking the evidence of Spirit baptism? Many charismatics and Pentecostals view Spirit baptism as an after-salvation experience that is accompanied by miraculous tongues-speaking. They point out that the coming of the Holy Spirit and tongues-speaking occurred together in Acts 2, 10, and 19. They speak of experiencing a “tingling feeling,” a “warm glow,” and a “sense of cleansing” when they were baptized by the Spirit. They say that they also spoke in tongues. And many of them

insist that when a person receives the Holy Spirit he will always speak in tongues as a sign of the Holy Spirit’s coming.

“If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.”
—Romans 8:9

Those who say that Spirit baptism and tongues-speaking always go together make three mistakes. First, they overlook the fact that the historical instances of simultaneous tongues-speaking and Spirit baptism were unique and pivotal events: the birth of the church (Acts 2), the opening of the door to the Gentiles (Acts 10), and the end of the validity of John’s baptism (Acts 19). They fail to consider that there is no evidence of tongues-speaking in most of the

salvation accounts of Acts: the 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost (2:41), the Ethiopian eunuch (8:37), Saul (9:1-9), the “great number” in Antioch (11:21), the “multitude” in Iconium (14:1), Lydia, the Philippian jailer, and their households (16:14-15,30-34).

Their second error is a wrong concept of the baptism of the Spirit. They see it as occurring either days, weeks, or even years after salvation. They say that some Christians never receive it. But Paul gave us a precise definition of Spirit baptism. He declared that it is the act of the Holy Spirit by which He makes every believer a member of the body of Christ. We read, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13).

Their third error is their failure to distinguish between the baptism of the Holy Spirit and His filling.

Spirit baptism is a fact in every believer’s salvation encounter. The filling is something that happens when we yield ourselves to the Lord in trust and obedience. We are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), but never to be Spirit baptized. Moreover, in 1 Corinthians 12:30 Paul indicated that not all believers could speak in tongues. But he said that all have been baptized into Christ’s body (v.13). The two are not indispensably linked.

Was tongues a sign of judgment on the Jews?

There seems to be an element of truth to this view. First Corinthians 14:20-25 shows us that in some instances tongues were more a sign of judgment than of blessing. When Paul quoted Isaiah 28:11-12, he cited an interesting precedent for the use of foreign tongues. Because the Israelites of Isaiah’s day would not listen

to God speak through the prophet in plain and simple speech, they ended up hearing Him speak to them through the language of the conquering Assyrians.

***“Do not
be children in
understanding;
. . . but in
understanding
be mature.”***

—Paul (1 Cor. 14:20)

In a sense, the foreign tongues that were spoken at Pentecost served a similar function. They served as a sign signaling the fact that God temporarily would be working in and through an international body known as the church rather than through the nation of Israel.

However, to say that the judgment idea is the only sign function of tongues is saying too much. We

have seen that it had a confirming, authenticating value. Besides, this view misses the point Paul was making in the passage. When he wrote, “Brethren, do not be children in understanding; . . . but in understanding be mature” (14:20), he was gently scolding them for their failure to see clearly the limited value of tongues. They are not effective to produce spiritual change. Paul quoted Isaiah as saying that even when the Israelites would hear the strange tongues of their Assyrian invaders, they still would not listen to nor turn to the Lord. In other words, if people won’t listen to the Word of God in plain and simple language, how will they ever listen to Him in words they can’t understand?

The Corinthian believers, like the Israelites, needed to realize that a priority was

to be placed on the clear, simple prophecies of the Lord. Hearing God's message in a foreign language would not accomplish more in their midst than the plain words of prophecy.

What about private praying in tongues? Many Christians who never speak in tongues publicly are enthusiastic about using tongues as a private prayer language. They admit that they don't understand what they are praying, but they claim that it makes them sense God's presence and leads them into real words of praise, adoration, petition, and intercession. They support this practice from certain verses in 1 Corinthians 14. Paul spoke about speaking in tongues "to God" in verses 2 and 28. And he specifically referred to praying in tongues in verses 14 through 17.

It seems very unlikely,

however, that the apostle Paul was either referring to or encouraging a valid private prayer language. Although such an interpretation can be read into the text, it doesn't seem natural to the flow of what he was saying. If Paul did tell his readers to practice uninterpreted tongues in private rather than in public, he certainly wasn't emphasizing this private use. His emphasis was that they were not to do it in public.

To interpret Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14 as an affirmation of private tongues-speaking is to miss his point. It is like a child saying that because his parents told him to keep his mess in his own room, they are condoning and encouraging a messy life. When in reality, the parents just didn't want the whole family to have to live with it.

Furthermore, it's

important to realize that Paul was in a position of having to regulate the intrusion of counterfeit tongues in the church. Certainly the Holy Spirit was not giving utterance to that which was so unprofitable and disorderly. But because the apostle was not on the scene in Corinth to pass judgment on each case, and because the real gift of tongues was still in existence, he did a very wise thing. He gave inspired principles for regulating tongues so that it would not continue to be a disruptive force in the church.

That is far different from saying that Paul was affirming and dignifying a new way of praying—a new spiritual gift that would enable us to talk to God without using our minds. This is not consistent with the way the Lord asks us to approach Him, nor with the purpose of tongues as a

supernatural sign for people whose faith needed to be kindled or developed.

There is no reason to believe that Paul was recommending a private prayer language. He made it clear that prayer involving the mind is better (vv.14-17). At best, Paul might have been saying in verse 28 that if a person wanted to speak or pray in uninterpreted tongues, he should do it by himself, not in the church.

Furthermore, those who practice or advocate the use of tongues as a private prayer language should be aware of the possibility that they may be doing something Jesus forbade. He said, “But when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Mt. 6:7). If you have seen printed-out transcripts of nonlanguage tongues, you know that the

sounds are very repetitive. Here is an example of tongues-speaking from a well-known work by Dr. George B. Cutter: “prou pray proddey, pa pallassate pa pau pu pe, teli terattata taw, terrea te te-te-te-te, vole virtue vum, elee lete lede luto, singe singe singe, imba, imba, imba.” Does that sound like vain repetition to you?

***“When you pray,
do not use vain
repetitions as the
heathen do.”***

—Jesus (Mt. 6:7)

In summary, the Bible doesn't recommend using tongues as a private prayer language. Besides, this practice, like all nonlanguage tongues-speaking, can be dangerous. It may lead a person to take something that is nothing more than an exciting

psychological phenomenon as a genuine miracle and token of God's approval. Like transcendental meditation, mystical rituals, and other mind-emptying procedures, it may open the door to demonic influences. It can promote a false idea that there is an easy road to a rich prayer life and spiritual maturity. It can promote a false sense of unity with people who hold widely diverse beliefs on the essentials. And worst of all, it can easily degenerate into a series of “vain repetitions,” the very thing against which Jesus issued a solemn warning. These considerations should be taken seriously by all who are inclined to believe that a private prayer language is something to be desired.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SPEAKING IN TONGUES

1. The first occurrence of speaking in unknown tongues in the Bible involved God's judgment at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).
2. The next reference to tongues was in Isaiah's warning to Israel of a coming judgment by a nation that would speak to them in another language (Isa. 28:11-12; 1 Cor. 14:21).
3. At Pentecost, tongues were a sign confirming Peter's words indicting Israel for their rejection and crucifixion of the Messiah (Acts 2:12-36).
4. On the Day of Pentecost, tongues were also a sign to the disciples of the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2:2-4,16-18).
5. At Pentecost, the Spirit enabled the disciples to speak in real dialects previously unknown to the speakers (Acts 2:5-11).
6. Tongues were a sign to unbelievers, not believers (1 Cor. 14:22).
7. Speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues were supernatural gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:10,28).
8. God bestowed the gift of tongues and interpretation of tongues on some but not all believers (1 Cor. 12:30).
9. Tongues-speaking was of lesser importance than prophecy and of far less importance than love (1 Cor. 12:31; 13).
10. Paul said that the gift of tongues "will cease" (1 Cor. 13:8).
11. The gift of prophecy was better than tongues because it edified the church (1 Cor. 14:1-4).

12. At best, uninterpreted tongues could only edify the speaker (1 Cor. 14:4).
13. Unregulated speaking in tongues sometimes led to confusion (1 Cor. 14:7-12).
14. In Corinth, public speaking in uninterpreted tongues had no value (1 Cor. 14:13-19).
15. Preoccupation with tongues was a sign of immaturity (1 Cor. 14:20).
16. Unregulated tongues could be a hindrance in the salvation of others (1 Cor. 14:23).
17. Since tongues could be counterfeited, public tongues-speaking had to be strictly regulated (1 Cor. 14:26-40).
18. Public tongues-speaking was to benefit and build up the body (1 Cor. 14:26).
19. Only two or three were to speak in tongues in a service, and they were to speak in turn (1 Cor. 14:27,30).
20. Tongues were not to be used in church without supernatural interpretation (1 Cor. 14:28).
21. Women were not to speak in tongues in the church (1 Cor. 14:34).
22. A proper and orderly atmosphere in church services was to be maintained (1 Cor. 14:40).
23. Acts and 1 Corinthians are the only New Testament books that refer to tongues-speaking.
24. Tongues-speaking was not the universal evidence of the baptism of the Spirit, because while every true believer is baptized by the Spirit, not all believers spoke in tongues (1 Cor. 12:13).

FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

The sound of a high wind. The ability to speak in foreign languages unlearned by those who spoke. These miraculous occurrences marked the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost to indwell and empower the followers of Christ to turn their world upside down (Acts 17:6).

Does the Holy Spirit have you? This same all-powerful Holy Spirit indwells God's people today. Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth of this truth by asking, "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? (1 Cor. 6:19). Why, then, are we so often powerless, defeated, and fearful? The answer is found in our failure to take this truth to heart. We try to live in our own strength. We don't give the Spirit of God

full control over our lives. We grieve the Holy Spirit with our disobedience and quench His power in us by our half-heartedness (Eph. 4:30; 1 Th. 5:19).

But we don't have to live this way! God's Spirit lives in us, yearning to help us. To be "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), we must recognize His presence, depend on Him, and submit to Him. Then, as we "walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16), He will produce in us "the fruit of the Spirit . . . love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

Another benefit of being Spirit-filled is the assurance that we are God's children. Paul wrote, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17).

The path to spiritual power and joy is not that of seeking spiritual gifts but that of dependence upon and submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Do you have the Spirit? In Romans 8:9, Paul wrote, “Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.” If you are like the 12 men of Acts 19 who didn’t even know about the Holy Spirit, you need to take the first step of faith. First, you must admit that you are a sinner who needs God’s forgiveness. Then, believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins, agree that He conquered death, and place your trust in Him. If you do, you will receive His forgiveness of your sins (Eph. 1:7). You will receive a new guiltless standing before God and be accepted by Him (Rom. 5:1-2). You will receive a new birth—making you a child in God’s family (1 Jn. 5:1). And you will

receive the Holy Spirit as the divine tenant in your body to give you power over sin (1 Cor. 6:19) and to give you a guarantee of eternal life (2 Cor. 5:5-8; Eph. 1:13-14).

***“When you believe
in Christ,
you will have
all of the Spirit
all of the time.”***

Believe on the Lord Jesus today. Don’t hesitate if you think of yourself as unworthy. It is because no one can earn heaven that God provided the way to Himself. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

When you believe in Christ, you will have His Spirit. Then you are to let His Spirit have you.

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