

## What About Speaking in Tongues?

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We realize that in preparing an article on tongues-speaking, we have attempted a difficult and controversial task. Many people's emotions are involved when this subject is raised. There are those who regard all who talk about speaking in tongues as fanatics, while others are ready to claim that if one does not speak in tongues he has never received the Holy Spirit. We want to be helpful rather than controversial, so we shall begin by investigating what the Bible says.

### 1. THE NEW TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The first New Testament reference to tongues is from the lips of Jesus himself, after His resurrection. In **Mark 16:17** He says, "And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name they shall cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues." This passage deserves careful study. Does Jesus mean that the believers would speak in languages which were unknown before, or simply in ordinary languages which were not their own? The Greek language, in which the New Testament was written, furnishes a clue. It has two words which may be translated "new." One is "*neos*" which denotes something which has just come into existence; the other is "*kainos*," which describes something that may have existed for a long time but has been put to a new use or brought into a new situation. An example of the difference is found in **Matthew 9:11**, where Jesus says, "but they put new (*neos*) wine into new (*kainos*) bottles." The wine has just been fermented; the wine-skins (called bottles) may have been made long before, but have never been used for wine. In **Mark 16:17**, "*kainos*" is used (which strongly implies that Jesus meant that believers were to speak in languages which were in common use), but which were new for them .

The next mention of tongues follows the first by only a few weeks. The incident is recorded in **Acts 2**, the scene at Pentecost. Here there is universal agreement that the "tongues" were ordinary languages which were understood by the crowds, but which

the disciples had never learned in the ordinary manner. The narrative itself suggests the reason for the speaking in tongues. It was meant as a visible proof of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Peter explains this in verse 17. In addition, Paul says in **1 Corinthians 14:22**, “Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not.” The “other tongues” were the miraculous proof which made believers out of three thousand unbelievers on the day of Pentecost.

The next mention of tongues is in **Acts 10:46**. The Gospel had so far been preached only to Jews. It has been preached in Samaria (**Acts 8:5-25**), but the Samaritans were regarded as being at least part Jewish. It is interesting to note that the proofs of the Spirit’s presence in Samaria were miracles of healing; there is no mention of speaking in tongues. But in **Acts 10**, Peter, after seeing a vision on the housetop in Joppa, had gone with six Jewish brethren to Caesarea to the home of a full Gentile. They were all believers in Christ, but they did not believe that the Holy Spirit would be given to Gentiles. So, as a visible proof of the Spirit’s presence, to convince the Jewish brethren beyond any possible doubt, the Gentiles spoke in tongues. In a similar circumstance recorded in **Acts 19:1-7**, the gift of tongues was again given as proof of the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Now we turn to the one other place where the gift of tongues is discussed, the first Corinthian Letter. The Corinthians were very much concerned about spiritual gifts (**1 Corinthians 14:12**) and apparently were so anxious to display them that Paul felt it necessary to warn them. Here we find something that we have not noticed in the passages we have already studied – the speaking through the Spirit in language that “no man understandeth” (**1 Corinthians 14:2**). Paul’s concern seems to be to warn against the over-emphasis on the use of tongues. He is saying (verses 14 and 28) that speaking in tongues is a devotional exercise which benefits the one who does it, but is of little use to others, and that therefore, while it is not to be forbidden (verse 39), it is to be restricted (verses 27-28). He also emphasizes the importance of prophesying, which does indeed benefit the whole church.

## 2. TONGUES IN CHURCH HISTORY

Whatever may have been its importance or meaning to the early church, the gift of tongues soon dropped out of notice. Dr. Phillip Schaff, the church historian, says that tongues-speaking was unknown after the third century, and we find no references to it during the Middle Ages or in the writings of the Reformers. But we find it reappearing early in our present century. And in recent years it has come into such prominence that the conservative magazine **Christianity Today** has devoted several articles to it. In the October 8, 1971 issue, James S. Tinney claims that the real beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement was in a small church in Los Angeles, California, in 1906. The

pastor of the group was W. J. Seymour, a Negro who had come from Texas where there had been isolated instances of speaking in tongues. This minister with his congregation determined to pray for a recurrence of the apostolic gifts, and the gift of tongues appeared among them and spread over the entire nation. Christianity Today has stated that the Pentecostal groups are the fastest-growing Christian bodies today. But the gift of tongues has been reported in many denominations, from Episcopalians and Presbyterians to Brethren and Mennonites.

### 3. SPEAKING IN TONGUES TODAY

It is because of this present interest that this article is being written. As we have said before, there are those who say that no one who has not spoken in tongues, may claim to have the Holy Spirit. There are others who feel that the gift is at best a false claim and at worst the work of demons. The writer believes that, as is often the case, both of these extreme positions are too strong, and that the truth is somewhere between. It would be out of place to say that the Holy Spirit could not bestow this gift today. It is true that miracles and signs were more frequent in the period of the establishment of the church than they are today, but we believe that they do happen, and we believe that the gift of tongues can also be given.

When the gift of tongues is given, it may be subject to the same abuses that prevailed at Corinth. There is danger of its being used for display rather than for worship. Paul says that in the church every spiritual gift be used only for the edification of the whole church. In **1 Corinthians 14:28**, after giving permission for two or at most three persons to speak in tongues provided that someone interprets, he adds, **“But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church, and let him speak to himself and to God.”** Some years ago, in a radio message on the subject of tongues, the evangelist Oral Roberts said that he himself often speaks in tongues, but always in private. This would seem to be a good suggestion for those who claim great devotional benefit and closeness to God from the practice, and it would insure that in the public assembly there would be no violation of the injunction in **1 Corinthians 14:10** that **“all things be done decently and in order.”** Most of the criticism today of those who practice speaking in tongues centers around this point. Often the displays are boisterous, in contrast to the quiet and gentle nature of the Holy Spirit.

Much more characteristic of the Spirit's work is an account of an experience by Dr. Frank Laubach, pioneer missionary to the Philippines. In the first year of his stay there, while he was learning the language and had little human companionship, he often went into the mountains. One day, as he stood on a high point admiring the view, without any conscious act on his part, he suddenly began reciting the most beautiful poetry. He recited for perhaps ten minutes, then again without conscious act on his part, he

stopped. He was able to remember only a few sentences, but he treasured the occasion as a precious gift of the Spirit.

I also remember reading from a forgotten source a story of a missionary in Africa who, while traveling from one station to another, was captured by a band of black warriors from a strange tribe. He did not understand their language. They dragged him before their chief, and after consultation seemed to arrive at a decision. The missionary was surrounded by a circle of warriors with poised spears! He supposed his end had come, and committed his soul to God. But at this point, and again without any conscious act on his part, he began to speak. He had no idea what he was saying; the words sounded like idle jabbering. But he noticed that the chief and his warriors were listening. The missionary talked for a few minutes, then no more words came. But the men were visibly moved, they released the missionary, led him back to the trail from which they had taken him, and sent him away. This seems like a genuine example of the work of the Holy Spirit.

We would advise restraint on the part of any who want to claim that the gift of tongues is necessary for the spiritual person. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 12:30**, “Do all speak with tongues?” implying that it is perfectly normal for a Christian not to do so. In both lists of gifts, in verses 8-10 and 28, he lists the gift of tongues last. This would also suggest that no one should be discouraged because he does not have the gift. It is true that Paul tells the Corinthians to “covet earnestly the best gifts” (**1 Corinthians 12:31**), but he also tells them that the Spirit divides them out to men according to His will (**1 Corinthians 12:11**). Some groups claim to have discovered procedures by which any believer can obtain spiritual gifts. Such methods generally have one thing in common: The artificial excitement of the emotions by means of noise, shouting, or fast music. And psychologists agree, that under the spell of excited emotions strange things can happen, even without any supernatural power. We must also remember that demons do try to counterfeit the work of the Holy Spirit, and an excited seeker may be deceived into thinking he has received a spiritual gift when he has not.

We must point out too that over-concern about the visible manifestation of spiritual gifts may lead to seeking them as an end in themselves and may divert the seeker’s attention from the real hallmark of spirituality, which is obedience. Jesus said, speaking of those who pose as teachers, “By their fruits ye shall know them” (**Matthew 7:20**). He told His disciples, “He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me” (**John 14:21**). Regardless of the spiritual gifts of which a person may boast – if his actions do not show a charitable love toward all men, if his conversation is not free from all forms of impurity, and if he is not honest and industrious in his daily work – then he has not attained the spiritual growth that entitles him to teach others.

There is danger that in overenthusiastic concern for the visible manifestation of spiritual gifts, men may neglect the clearly expressed will of God. I remember an incident in which a member of a group that was much concerned with spiritual gifts had done something which seemed to me a clear violation of a certain Scripture. I pointed this out to another member of the same group. This person did not even stop to discuss the question of whether or not the Scriptures were violated; he simply said, "The Spirit told him to do it, therefore it was the right thing to do." But the Holy Spirit will never tell anyone to do what is contrary to the Bible. The Apostle John tells us to test the spirits, and the Word of God must be the test. One sister always wore a head-veiling (in accordance with the teaching in **1 Corinthians 11:1-16**), but when she became interested in a certain group that emphasizes speaking in tongues, attended their services, and finally applied for membership – they refused to accept her as a member unless she would remove her covering. She pointed out the instructions of the Bible. Their answer (couched in persuasive language) amounted to this: We have direct communication with the Holy Spirit, and so we are not bound by what the Bible says. But Jesus said, "**He that rejects me, and receives not my words, has one that judges him; the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day**" (**John 12:48**). Anyone who refuses to accept the Bible as the final rule for the Christian life, has no right to claim to be an authority on spiritual gifts.

In conclusion, let it be emphasized that there is need for an open mind toward the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He often does not act by the rules we try to set for Him. He may work in a way no one has thought of. The following true experience was reported in the *Reader's Digest*. An American tourist was visiting an English-speaking acquaintance in a town in Switzerland. On Sunday he attended church with his host, and a young and enthusiastic minister preached a sermon of which the tourist did not understand a word. But he was held and thrilled by the young minister's fervor. Walking home afterward, the host apologized for the combination of circumstances which he supposed must have been wearisome. But the guest said that he had enjoyed the service. "In fact," he said, "my mind was crowded with beautiful thoughts," and he began to tell of the things which he had been thinking. As he turned to his host, he noticed that there was a look of amazement on his face and asked him what was the matter. The host replied, "Those were the very things the minister was saying!"