

The Gift of Tongues

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PART ONE: WHAT WAS THE GIFT OF TONGUES?

Introduction

During my third year of college I had a roommate who was also a believer. We enjoyed good Christian fellowship in the Lord and attended church together. But after the summer vacation of 1982 he returned a different person. He explained to me that during the summer he had been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Now he was a member of a Charismatic church and spoke in tongues.

I remember that often he would return to our room from work in the evening, read his Bible, pray, and start speaking in what he called his prayer language. It didn't sound like real language—just certain syllables being repeated. I was skeptical of his gift of tongues, but even so I remember asking myself several times, “Am I missing something? Should I seek this baptism of the Holy Spirit and try to speak in tongues?” I had not been a believer for very long, only about two years, and I certainly wanted everything God had for me. If speaking in tongues was truly a gift from God, then I wanted it. I sincerely wanted to find out if the gift of tongues was for Christians today or not.

Perhaps you've had a similar experience. You also wonder about those who speak in tongues. You wonder if you're missing something. Or perhaps you've been taught to believe that tongues aren't for today, but you don't know *why* you believe this should be the case. You're not sure of the biblical support for this belief. It's not only important to know *what* to believe, but also *why* to believe it, and to be able to support the reasons from Scripture.

Before getting into the gift of tongues, I must stress a foundational principle for Bible-believing evangelical Christians. The Bible, and the Bible alone, must be our final authority. The Reformers called this the principle of *sola Scriptura*, “Scripture alone.” The Bible is the final judge of what we believe and what we practice as Christians. Along with this basic principle is another: no experience is self-authenticating. In other words, we cannot claim that any experience we have is automatically valid, just because we have it. Jesus even said it was possible to prophesy in His name, cast out demons in His name, perform many miracles in His name, and not even be saved (Matt 7:21–23).¹ The Bible must be the judge of all our truth claims, including our personal experiences. Therefore, no matter what issue we examine, whether the gift of tongues or something else, we must start with Scripture, not experience.

¹ I am not implying by this that all those who claim to perform miracles or speak in tongues today are unsaved. But what I am saying is this: it's possible for us to be involved in activities or have wonderful experiences that we think must surely be biblical and pleasing to the Lord when in fact they are neither. How can we know? By evaluating them on the basis of Scripture.

Now, concerning the gift of tongues, there are two fundamental questions to answer. First, what exactly *was* the gift of tongues in the NT? Specifically, what was the *nature* of tongues and how did they *function* in the church? Second, did the Holy Spirit give tongues as a *permanent* gift to the church? In other words, is the gift of tongues for believers *today*?²

As we will discover, determining the answer to the first question in a large way helps provide a compelling answer to the second question. Regarding that first question, then, what the gift of tongues was, the best place to begin is the first place tongues are mentioned, in Acts 2. This also happens to be the clearest and most detailed description we have in the NT of what the gift of tongues actually was.

Tongues in Acts

In Acts 2:1–4 we read how the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost. This was in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise in Acts 1:5 (cf. Luke 24:49). Acts 2:4 states that the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak “with other tongues” (ἑτέραις γλώσσαις / *heterais glossais*).³ What does this mean? For many Charismatics today, tongues are a spiritual, heavenly, or angelic language, completely unknown to mankind, unless someone has the gift to interpret them.⁴ But were the “other tongues” of Acts 2:4 unknown heavenly or spiritual languages, or actual known human foreign languages?

Their Nature: Tongues were Known Human Languages

There are several pieces of evidence in Acts 2 which indicate that these “other tongues” were known human languages of the day. The miracle of Pentecost was that the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to suddenly and fluently speak foreign languages which they hadn’t known or spoken previously. Let’s examine the nature of these tongues.

The Word Γλῶσσα

The word for “tongue” in v. 4, γλῶσσα / *glossa*, is used fifty times in the NT. Seventeen times it’s used for the organ of the body used for speech. In the Book of Revelation it’s used seven times in connection with tribes, peoples, and nations to describe ethnic groups that speak their own languages. Once it is used figuratively to describe tongues of fire (Acts 2:3). The other twenty-five times the word is used to describe the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. Thus, forty-nine out of fifty times the NT writers use the word γλῶσσα / *glossa* to describe some aspect of human speech—either the organ of speech or the result of speech, that is, the content or language of the speech. This, then, is the fundamental NT meaning of the word γλῶσσα / *glossa*: the organ or language of human

² It is certainly legitimate to ask whether certain gifts of the Holy Spirit given to the early church were temporary. Almost all evangelicals, including Charismatics, agree that at least one gift *was* temporary: the gift of apostle. 1 Cor 12:28 and Eph 4:11 make it clear that the apostle was a gift, and yet there are no apostles in the church today. Why? Because by its very *nature* and *function* the gift of apostle was temporary. We will see that the situation with tongues is very much linked to the issue of apostle in the NT.

³ All Bible quotations in this paper are from the NASB.

⁴ For example, Jack W. Hayford refers to the gift of tongues as speech in a spiritual or heavenly language (*Grounds for Living* [Kent, England: Sovereign World, 2001], 172).

speech. It would be perfectly legitimate to translate ἑτέραις γλώσσαις / *heterais glossais* in Acts 2:4 as “with other languages.”

The Word Γλῶσσα as a Synonym for Διάλεκτος

The nature of the “other tongues” in Acts 2:4 becomes even more clear when we read the reaction of those who heard the disciples speaking. In v. 6 Luke uses a different word to describe their speech, “language” (διάλεκτος / *dialektos*), which means the language of a particular nation or the dialect of a particular region. It’s used six times in the NT, only in Acts, and always refers to an actual human language spoken in a particular location of the world.

So when the disciples began speaking in “other tongues,” those listening were amazed because each heard his own native language or dialect being spoken. Each heard his mother tongue, or the language to which he was born (v. 8). Verses 7–8 tell us why they were amazed: they knew the disciples were Galileans. All Palestinian Jews spoke Aramaic, but Galileans had a peculiar accent, and because of this they were looked down upon by Jerusalem Jews as being provincial. For example, on the night Jesus was betrayed, people identified Peter as a Galilean because of his accent (Luke 22:59).

And yet now these ordinary, uneducated Galileans were fluently speaking languages from all around the Mediterranean and Near East. They were speaking in the mother tongues that these Jews and proselytes (v. 10) had learned as children. Then, note in v. 11 how Luke reverts to the word “tongues” (γλῶσσα / *glossa*). Those who heard the disciples testified that “we hear them in our *own* tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.” Notice the significance of this: the “other tongues” spoken by the disciples are called “our tongues” by those who heard them. “Other tongues” and “our tongues” are the same tongues, that is, normal human languages.

We’ve seen so far that Luke uses two words, γλῶσσα / *glossa* and διάλεκτος / *dialektos*, interchangeably to describe known languages of the day. When the disciples spoke with “other tongues” on Pentecost, they were speaking various known languages and dialects. The tongues were not unknown heavenly or spiritual languages, but actual human languages of the day.

Luke’s List of Known Languages

This interpretation of the “other tongues” of Acts 2:4 is made certain when we read vv. 9–11. Luke carefully lists all the people groups who heard the disciples in their own languages that day. These “other tongues” were not unknown spiritual or heavenly languages, but rather the common languages and dialects spoken in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world at that time. Luke takes the time to list them all out for us, so that there could be no question. The disciples spoke real human languages that day, not unknown heavenly or spiritual languages.

The gift of tongues is only mentioned twice more in Acts, and there is nothing in those contexts to indicate that those tongues were any different than the tongues of Acts 2. In Acts 10:44–46, Peter is preaching the gospel to Cornelius the Gentile and his household, and the exact same thing happens to them as happened to the disciples on Pentecost: the Holy Spirit falls upon them, they speak “with tongues” (γλώσσαις / *glossais*) and magnify God, and those who witness it are amazed. Peter

recognizes in v. 47 that these Gentiles have received the Holy Spirit “just as we *did*.” Peter repeats this fact in Acts 11:15, and then adds in v. 17 that the Gentiles received the same gift of the Spirit that he and the other disciples did. There is no evidence that the accompanying miracle of tongues was any different either. In fact, the same miracle of suddenly spoken foreign languages would have tipped Peter off that they were receiving the same gift of the Spirit.

We find the same thing when we come to the last reference to tongues in Acts 19:1–6. Paul preaches the gospel of Christ to some disciples of John the Baptist, lays his hands on them, the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and they speak with tongues and prophesy. There is no textual reason to think these tongues were any different from the tongues of Acts 2 and 10.

This brings up an important principle of interpretation that has a long history in the church. It was called in Latin *analogia fidei*, or “analogy of faith.” As a general interpretive principle, analogy of faith means that we should use clear texts of Scripture in order to shed light on similar passages that are less clear.⁵ Since Acts 2 so clearly defines for us the nature of the gift of tongues, we ought to let Acts 2 inform us when we encounter other passages that refer to the gift of tongues without further explanation. Acts 2 clearly gives us the default definition of tongues: *the NT gift of tongues was the sudden, spontaneous speaking of a foreign language by someone with no previous knowledge of that language*.

Before moving on to the *function* of tongues in Acts, let me make one more point about their nature. One of the foremost NT scholars of our day is Gordon D. Fee, who is a continuationist (one who claims that miraculous gifts like tongues continue through the church age until Christ returns). However, after discussing tongues in 1 Corinthians, Fee admits that there is no way to know whether contemporary tongues-speaking is the same as NT tongues. “There is simply no way to know,” he says. As an experience, Fee continues, contemporary tongues-speaking is “*analogous* to” the tongues of the NT, “a supernatural activity of the Spirit which functions in many of the same ways, and for many of its practitioners has value similar to that described by Paul.”⁶

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., a cessationist (one who claims that the miraculous gifts ceased with the apostolic era), reacts to Fee’s admission. “This apparent afterthought is even more startling. Now it appears, unless I am mistaken, that measured by the instance of tongues, it is after all not a simple ‘of course all the gifts continue until the consummation.’ Rather, what we have today are no more than analogues displaying certain similarities with their presumed New Testament counterparts.”⁷

After noting that Fee and other continuationists are unable to state the exact nature of the miraculous gifts like tongues, prophecy, the word of wisdom, and the word of knowledge, Gaffin goes on to say this,

These concessions (that word does not seem unfair) concerning tongues, the word of wisdom, and the word of knowledge, coupled with the fact, already noted, that continuationists cannot

⁵ Bruce A. Demarest, “Analogy of Faith,” in *EDT*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 43.

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 890, n. 17, emphasis original, cited in Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “A Cessationist View,” in Wayne A. Grudem, ed., *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 60.

⁷ Gaffin, “Cessationist View,” 60.

agree among themselves what prophecy is, prompt this question: If the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth and order, is really restoring these prophetic gifts to the church today in a widespread way, would there be, as there in fact is, such widespread ambiguity and confusion, not to mention division, about them?⁸

Their Function: Tongues are Revelatory

We have examined the nature of the gift of tongues in Acts. This gift was the sudden, spontaneous speaking of a foreign language by those with no previous knowledge of the language. Now, what is the *function* of the gift of tongues in Acts? Let's see if the three passages in Acts that mention tongues give us any clues. In Acts 2:11 the astonished witnesses of the Pentecost miracle testify that they are hearing the disciples "in our *own* tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." Luke doesn't tell us what mighty deeds of God they were proclaiming, but it's safe to assume they had something to do with what was happening that day and how it related to the person and work of Christ. This is what Peter goes on to declare as he preaches the gospel of salvation through the death of the resurrected and glorified Son of God. Through the miraculous gift of tongues, the disciples proclaimed these mighty deeds of God.

Another clue from Acts 2 may come from Peter's sermon. He quotes the prophecy from Joel 2 concerning the pouring out of the Spirit and the miraculous events that will accompany it. Joel predicts that when the Spirit comes people will prophesy, see visions, and dream dreams (Acts 2:18–19). These are ways that God gave His people new revelation. When Peter sees the arrival of the Spirit and the miracle of tongues, he relates it to Joel's prophecy. Peter may have made this connection because he and the other disciples were in fact proclaiming in tongues new revelation from God.

Now we move to Acts 10:46. There Peter and the other Jewish disciples are astonished to hear Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles "speaking with tongues and exalting God." Again, Luke doesn't tell us the words they spoke in tongues as they exalted God, but it may be that once again, they were exalting God for what was happening: God was opening the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ directly to the Gentiles without their having to come through Judaism.

In Acts 19:6, the third reference to tongues in Acts, we read that when Paul laid his hands on these disciples of John, "the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they *began* speaking with tongues and prophesying." Luke doesn't tell us if they were declaring the mighty deeds of God or exalting Him,

⁸ Ibid. Gaffin discusses Fee's admission regarding the nature of the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge on p. 59. Fee cannot distinguish between the two and concludes that the difference "is perhaps forever lost to us." Gaffin reacts, "I find this admission remarkable. If the New Testament teaches with such certainty that these gifts, along with all the others listed in 1 Corinthians 12, continue in the church today, why the difficulty and uncertainty in distinguishing them and knowing what they are?" Other continuationist scholars make similar admissions. Jack Deere admits, "I don't see anyone who has the quality and quantity of miracles that took place in the apostles' ministry" (Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 68), cited in Ralph Drollinger, "Are the Sign Gifts for Today?" in *Capitol Ministries* (on the web at www.capitolministries.com/docs/CA/2000/CA02-16-00.pdf). The continuationist theologian Wayne A. Grudem admits that the contemporary gift of prophecy is of a lesser authority than the NT gift: "There is almost uniform testimony from all sections of the charismatic movement that prophecy is imperfect and impure, and will contain elements which are not to be obeyed or trusted" (*The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1988], 110, cited in Drollinger, "Sign Gifts").

but he does say something interesting: they spoke with tongues *and* prophesied. Like tongues, the gift of prophecy in Scripture was miraculous. The prophet was the mouth or spokesman of God. The prophet received by divine revelation the very Word of God, which he then declared to other people with the authority of “thus says the Lord.” An important element of prophecy was the ability to predict future events. Prophecy was not only miraculous, but also revelatory. The prophet supernaturally received new revelation from God and proclaimed it to others as the authoritative Word of God. An example of a NT prophet is Agabus, whom we see exercising the gift of prophecy in Acts 11 and 21.

Now, we can’t say conclusively from these three passages in Acts that the tongues were revelatory, that is, that those who spoke in tongues received from the Spirit new truth from God that they proclaimed in other languages. However, the passages may be taken to imply this for three reasons. First, those who spoke in tongues proclaimed the mighty works of God and exalted God, apparently concerning the new work God was doing in starting the church. This was new truth. Second, Peter connects the miracle of Pentecost with the prophecy of Joel. Joel connected the coming of the Spirit with miraculous revelatory activity.

Third, some who spoke in tongues also prophesied. They proclaimed truth about God both in foreign languages (tongues) and in their native language (prophecy). It’s reasonable to conclude that tongues and prophecy had similar functions: to declare new truth from God that is supernaturally received. When we get to the tongues in 1 Corinthians that’s exactly what we’ll find: *for Paul tongues and prophecy were functionally equivalent*.

Tongues in 1 Corinthians

Almost everyone today, tongues speakers and non-tongues speakers alike, agree that the tongues of Acts were actual foreign languages.⁹ However, almost all tongues speakers and even many non-tongues speakers believe that the tongues described in 1 Corinthians were somehow different—that they were ecstatic speech in an unknown heavenly or spiritual language. Charismatics especially want to believe this, because the tongues spoken today have been studied scientifically by linguists and shown to not be real human language.¹⁰ Charismatics depend largely upon the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12–14 for biblical support for their tongues.

However, in light of what we have already demonstrated from Acts, the evidence would have to be pretty clear to show us that the tongues of Corinth were any different from the tongues in Acts. In fact, the evidence points to the opposite conclusion: the tongues in 1 Corinthians are the same as the tongues in Acts. The first line of evidence are the words that the Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12–14.

⁹ Some have argued that the real miracle of Pentecost was one of hearing, and that the “tongues” were some form of ecstatic utterance and not identifiable language. But this is an unnatural reading of Acts 2, which states that the witnesses to the miracle heard their native languages (v. 7) and their own tongues being spoken (v. 11) (Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* [Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1996], 212).

¹⁰ See for example the following linguistic studies: Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); William J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); and H. N. Malony and A. A. Lovekin, *Glossolalia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

The Terminology Used

First, just like Luke, Paul uses the word γλῶσσα / *glossa* in 1 Corinthians. He uses it four times in chapter 12, two times in chapter 13, and fifteen times in chapter 14. Remember from Acts that the clear default definition of speaking in tongues was speaking in foreign languages not previously known. Adding to this the fact that Paul and Luke were co-workers, it's hard to imagine them using the same word to describe completely different phenomena without explanation.

Second, we also notice that Paul talks about “kinds of tongues” in 1 Cor 12:10, 28. The word “kind,” γένος / *genos*, means family, offspring, race, or kind in the NT. For instance, in Matt 13:47 there are many kinds of fish, but all are fish. In Matt 17:21 there are several kinds of demons, but all are demons. And so there are different kinds of languages, but all are languages.

Third, in 1 Cor 14:10 Paul uses yet another word for human language, φωνή / *phone*, when he says there are a great many kinds of languages in the world, and there is no such thing as a language without meaning. By using this terminology Paul is not classifying known human languages together with some kind of unknown ecstatic speech. They could never be related to each other. Unintelligible utterances are not genuine language. So when Paul speaks of “kinds of tongues” in 1 Cor 12:10 and “kinds of languages” in 1 Cor 14:10, he is talking about various human languages spoken in the world.

Fourth, in 1 Cor 14:21 Paul speaks of the “other tongues” (ἑτερογλώσσοις / *heteroglossois*) and “other lips” (χείλεσιν ἑτέρω / *cheilesin heteron*) of foreigners. The first term is similar to the “other tongues” of Acts 2:4. We saw in Acts 2 what “other tongues” meant: actual foreign languages. Here in 1 Cor 14:21, which is a quote from Isa 28:11, the reference is to the Assyrians who conquered the northern ten tribes of Israel, and spoke a foreign language, Assyrian. Paul continues in v. 22, “So then, tongues are a sign.” He applies the prophecy of foreign languages in Isa 28:11 to the tongues being spoken at Corinth. Therefore, they too could only be real foreign languages.

The fifth and last important term in 1 Corinthians is “clear speech” (εὐσημον λόγον / *eusemon logon*) spoken “by the tongue” (διὰ τῆς γλώσσης / *dia tes glosses*) in 14:9. Here Paul uses yet another word, λόγος / *logos*, which means “word, speech.” Paul asks the Corinthians, If you don't use your tongue to form understandable words, how will others know what's being spoken? That's why Paul tells them in v. 13, “Therefore, let the one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.” According to v. 28, if there is no interpreter, let the one who has the tongue remain silent. To speak a foreign language without interpretation is like speaking into the air (v. 9).

When we take all of Paul's words and phrases together in 1 Corinthians 12–14—speaking in tongues, various kinds of languages, many different languages, foreign languages, understandable speech—we come to the same conclusion we did in Acts: to speak in tongues is to miraculously speak in actual foreign languages otherwise not known. There is no evidence that these tongues in Corinth were ecstatic utterances in a heavenly or spiritual language.¹¹

¹¹ But what about 1 Cor 13:1, where Paul states, “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging symbol”? Doesn't this prove that the tongues of Corinth were ecstatic heavenly speech and not actual human languages? Not necessarily. First, Paul's statement is hypothetical (“if”). Nothing definitive can be concluded about the actual existence of angelic languages on the basis of a pure

The Need for Interpretation

So the first line of evidence that the tongues of Corinth were actual foreign languages is the terminology Paul uses. Now the second argument is Paul's discussion of interpretation. This is the whole point of Paul's argument: in the church service the edification of the entire body must be the goal. This is the very purpose of all the spiritual gifts: the edification of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:7, 25, 14:3–4, 12, 19, 26). Therefore, uninterpreted languages have no place in the church service because they don't edify the body.

Paul mentions the interpretation of tongues seven times in 1 Corinthians 12–14. Two times he speaks of the gift of interpretation (ἑρμηνεία / *hermeneia*, 12:10, 14:26), four times of the act of interpreting (διερμηνεύω / *diermeneuo*, 12:30, 14:5, 13, 27), and one time of the interpreter (διερμηνευτής / *diermeneutes*, 14:28). These words are used six other times in the NT, and every time they refer either to the interpretation of written language, or the translation of one language into another.

Interpretation assumes real language. Just as the gift of tongues was the supernatural speaking of a foreign language not previously learned, so the gift of the interpretation of tongues was the supernatural interpreting of a foreign language not previously known. You can't translate ecstatic utterances because they are not real language. The gift of interpretation was the supernatural translation of a foreign language into the language of the congregation, so that all the believers gathered together could be edified by the message.

The NT gift of tongues was the speaking of actual human languages. The tongues spoken today are not. The NT gift of interpretation was the actual translation of an actual foreign language into the language of the congregation. Today, if there is interpretation, and very often there is not (in direct violation of Paul's command found in 1 Cor 14:28), it is the pseudo-interpretation of pseudo-tongues.

Dr. John Walvoord, professor of theology for many years at Dallas Theological Seminary, who is now with the Lord, told the story of one of his students who conducted a test. The student memorized one of the psalms in Hebrew, went to a Charismatic meeting and recited the psalm out

hypothetical. Second, there's good reason to believe Paul is reflecting the Corinthians' own attitude about themselves. The continuationist NT scholar Gordon Fee feels that "one can make a good deal of sense of the Corinthian view of 'spirituality' if they believed that they had already entered into some expression of angelic existence. This would explain their rejection of sexual life and sexual roles (cf. 7:1–7; 11:2–16) and would also partly explain their denial of a future bodily existence (15:12, 35). It might also lie behind their special interest in 'wisdom' and 'knowledge.' For them the evidence of having 'arrived' at such a 'spiritual' state would be their speaking the 'tongues of angels.' Hence the high value placed on this gift" (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 631). To this I would add the other interesting references Paul makes to angels in the book (1 Cor 4:9, 6:3, 11:10). In each of these cases Paul is setting them straight regarding their view of themselves in relation to angels. Others might claim that the tongues of Corinth were ecstatic heavenly speech and not actual foreign languages on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14. There Paul refers to the tongues speaker as speaking mysteries (v. 2), praying with the spirit and not the mind (v. 14), and speaking to God (v. 28). However, this makes perfect sense if the tongues are foreign languages. The reason that tongues convey mysteries with the spirit to God is because the tongues speaker has no idea what he is saying without the gift of interpretation.

loud as if he was speaking in tongues. Someone with the “gift of interpretation” attempted to translate what was spoken and of course didn’t come close to what the student had actually spoken in Hebrew! This was a case of a sincere but misguided person trying to mimic the gift of interpretation possessed by the early church.

Conclusion

To summarize what we have seen so far, when we conduct a careful study Acts 2, which contains the clearest description we have of what it means to speak in tongues, we come to the conclusion that the gift of tongues was the supernatural speaking of a foreign language by someone with no previous knowledge of that language. When we go to 1 Corinthians 12–14, the only other lengthy NT discussion on the gift of tongues, we find no clear evidence to lead us to believe that these tongues were any different from the tongues of Acts. In fact, we find much evidence to the contrary.

As I said at the beginning, there are two questions to answer about tongues. First, what *was* the gift of tongues? I believe we have answered that question from Scripture. This leads to the second question. Is the gift of tongues for the church *today*? As I also said at the beginning, the answer to the first question helps us answer the second one. We’ve already touched upon the idea that tongues appear to have functioned as a source of new revelation, just as prophecy did. We will explore that point further, as well as look at how else tongues functioned in their NT context. Together these points will help us answer the question of whether tongues are for today. So now let’s move on to the second question.

PART TWO: IS THE GIFT OF TONGUES FOR TODAY?

Introduction

In the first part of this presentation we answered the question, What is the gift of tongues? We specifically examined Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12–14 and came to the conclusion that *the gift of tongues was the sudden, spontaneous ability to speak a foreign language, given by the Holy Spirit to someone with no previous knowledge of that language.*

Now we want to answer the second important question concerning tongues, Is the gift of tongues for the church today? I believe that when we get a clear picture of the *purpose* and *function* of tongues in the early church, we can conclude that no, the gift of tongues is not for the church today.

The Prediction Concerning Tongues: They Will Cease

Let’s begin with 1 Cor 13:8–10. Here we read of three gifts—prophecy, knowledge, and tongues—and their relationship to a coming time of clear and complete knowledge (v. 12). Paul says in v. 8 that prophecy and knowledge will be done away. The verb Paul uses is καταργέω / *katargeo*, which means “to do away.” Here it is passive, meaning that these gifts of prophecy and knowledge will be done away. This is because they reflect an incomplete state of knowledge for believers. In the future we will have a perfect (v. 10) and full (v. 12) knowledge of things. This will be when we are face to face with the Lord in glory (v. 12).

We must keep in mind that the gifts of prophecy and knowledge were miraculous and revelatory. In the early years after Pentecost, the church needed the miraculous gift of receiving new knowledge from God (gift of knowledge) and the miraculous gift of proclaiming that new revelation to the church (gift of prophecy). But although miraculous and revelatory, these gifts were only partial and temporary. They served their purpose until the complete NT revelation could be written down and delivered “once for all” to the saints (Jude 3). Today we have God’s full written revelation, and although we can know it and proclaim it with the aid of the Spirit, according to Paul our knowledge is still unclear and incomplete. God’s word is adequate to serve its purpose today, but in the future we will obtain a perfect and complete knowledge of all the things God has for us.

Now, what does Paul say about tongues? In v. 8 he says they will cease (παύσονται / *pausontai*). Tongues will simply stop. Of course the question is, When will tongues stop? Will they continue until the Lord returns? Will they stop sometime before that? Paul doesn’t tell us. This isn’t his concern here. Paul is dealing with a problem in Corinth. The Corinthians were putting all their emphasis on spectacular gifts like tongues to the neglect of better gifts like prophecy. But even prophecy, as well as tongues, was evidence that the Corinthians’ knowledge was incomplete and not perfect like they thought. Actually, all the spiritual gifts are evidence that we live in an imperfect and incomplete state of knowledge even today. In the context Paul singles out these miraculous and revelatory gifts of knowledge, prophecy, and tongues because they are at center of the controversy over gifts in Corinth.

So Paul doesn’t tell us exactly when tongues would cease. Is there any way to answer this question? One way is to examine the historical situation. The early Church Fathers testify that the miraculous gift of tongues possessed by the apostles and their associates actually passed away with them.¹² This should not surprise us when we examine the *purpose* and *function* of tongues and other miracles in the early church. Tongues were just one of several miraculous gifts of the early church that served a specific purpose and function for that time. When those were fulfilled, the miraculous gifts were no longer necessary. This is analogous to the gift of apostle. The apostles served a certain purpose and exercised a certain function in the early church. When those were fulfilled, the apostles passed off the scene and we don’t have apostles any more today. We will now examine the purpose and function of tongues as one of the miraculous gifts given by the Spirit to the early church.

¹² For example, Chrysostom (A.D. 345–407) comments on 1 Corinthians 12–14 in this way, “This whole place is very obscure; but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place” (“Homilies in First Corinthians,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 13 volumes [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956], 12:168, cited in Drollinger, “Sign Gifts”). Likewise, Augustine (A.D. 354–430) discussed tongues in this way, “In the earliest times ‘the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed; and they spoke with tongues,’ which they had not learned, ‘as the Spirit gave them utterance.’ These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to shew that the gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a betokening and it passed away” (“The Epistle of St. John,” in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 7:497–98, cited in Drollinger, “Sign Gifts”). For a complete examination of this historical question, see Benjamin. B. Warfield, *Miracles: Yesterday and Today, True and False* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

The Purpose of Tongues: A Sign

Tongues and other miraculous gifts served as signs in the early church. Jesus performed miracles as signs (John 2:11), and He empowered His disciples to also perform miracles as signs (Mark 16:20). These miracles were signs because they signified or stood for some important truth.

A Sign that God was Beginning a New Work

Paul states in 1 Cor 14:22 that “tongues are for a sign.” The first purpose of tongues, as with the other miraculous gifts, was to serve as a sign that God was doing something new and special, that He was revealing Himself in a new way. We can understand this, because we also use certain signals when we start something new. For instance, we signal the start of a race by waving a flag or shooting a pistol. When people hear the shot or see the flag, they know the race has begun. In school we begin classes with a bell. When we hear the bell, we know classes are beginning. We signal the beginning of each new year with fireworks.

In the same way, when God began dealing with mankind in a new way at Pentecost, and began to give new revelation through the apostles, He did so with accompanying signs. We see this pattern earlier in Scripture. In Exodus, we read how God began a new work through the nation Israel, and how that new work was accompanied by miraculous signs. God delivered Israel from Egypt with signs such as the plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea. Later, God made a covenant with Israel, with Moses as mediator, and gave them His Law. That event was also marked by miraculous signs. The miracles served as a signal that God was *beginning a completely new work, and revealing Himself in a new way*, through the nation Israel.

Later in the OT we read of the next major phase of God’s work: the period of crisis in Israel and the ministry of the prophets. The beginning of this period was marked by the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, and what do we see? They performed many miraculous signs as a part of their ministry, which we read about in 1 and 2 Kings. Many prophets followed, with Malachi as the last OT prophet. He wrote the last words from God as part of the Old Covenant. What happened then? Silence: no more new prophets, no more new words from God, and no more miraculous signs for 400 years.¹³

We find, then, in the OT a definite pattern. When God began to work in a new way and gave new revelation, those events were marked by miraculous signs. Then when God finished that work, and there was no new revelation, what happened? The miraculous signs ceased with the revelation.

When we come to the NT we see exactly the same pattern. Through His own Son, God began a new work among mankind. Jesus came with fresh revelation from God. He came as a prophet like Moses. He came to be the Mediator of the New Covenant, just as Moses mediated the Old Covenant. Just as in the time of Moses, so also the ministry of Jesus was marked by miraculous

¹³ We sometimes forget how rare miracles were in Bible times. We read the Bible and think that miracles occurred throughout. But that is not the case. Apart from the miracles surrounding the Exodus, the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, and that of the later prophets, there were periods in the OT when no miracles occurred and there was no new word from God.

signs. The signs Jesus performed showed people that they were witnessing a new work of God (John 2:11; Acts 2:22).

Just as the ministry of Moses was followed by the ministry of other prophets, so also the ministry of Jesus was followed by the ministry of His apostles and prophets. Just as the ministry of the OT prophets was marked by miraculous signs, so also the ministry of the apostles and prophets was marked by miraculous signs (Mark 16:20). One of the miraculous signs that accompanied the ministry of the apostles and prophets was the gift of tongues (Mark 16:17).

So we see a clear biblical pattern. God began a new work through Moses with new revelation accompanied by miraculous signs. God continued the work through prophets with further revelation and more miraculous signs. When the period of revelation ended, the miraculous signs also ended. Then God began a new work of revelation through His Son accompanied by miraculous signs. God continued the work through apostles and prophets with further revelation and more miraculous signs. When that period of new revelation ended, what would we expect to end? According to the pattern of Scripture, we would expect the accompanying miraculous signs to end as well. History attests that they ended with the ministry of the NT apostles and prophets.

A Sign that Confirmed the Authority of the Apostles

The second purpose of tongues was to confirm the authority of the apostles. We can return to the example of Moses. The Lord confirmed His own authority to Moses with the miraculous signs of the burning bush, the staff, and the leprous hand of Moses. Likewise, when God sent *Moses* to Egypt, He commanded Moses to perform miraculous signs with *his* staff in order to confirm *his* authority, so that the people would believe that God had really sent him (Exodus 3–4). In Deuteronomy 18, God predicted that other prophets would arise, and they also would perform miraculous signs so that the people could know that God had definitely sent them, just as He has sent Moses.

In the NT we see the same pattern. The Lord Jesus came as a prophet, performing miraculous signs. He told the Jews in John 10:37–38, “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.” But what do we read in John 12:37? “But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him.”

Then the Lord Jesus gave *His* apostles authority to go and preach the gospel. He enabled *them* to perform miraculous signs to confirm *their* authority, so that people would know that they truly had been sent by God. We read at the end of Mark that, after the resurrected Christ commissioned them, the apostles “went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed” (Mark 16:20). The miraculous signs confirmed their authority to preach this new revelation from God. During the ministry of the apostles in Acts, we again read of this purpose of miracles. Paul and Barnabas were ministering in Iconium, “speaking boldly *with reliance* upon the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands” (Acts 14:3). Once again, we see that the purpose of the miracles was to confirm the authority of their message.

Paul speaks of this same purpose for miraculous signs in 2 Cor 12:12. Here Paul is defending his authority as a true apostle, and what is his proof? The fact that he performed the “signs of a true apostle” in their presence “with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles,” which served to confirm his apostolic authority and message. Another important passage that repeats this same truth is Heb 2:3–4. The author of Hebrews declares that the gospel of salvation that was first spoken through the Lord (i.e., Jesus) was confirmed by those who heard (i.e., the apostles) “by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit.” Here we see the pattern described earlier. Jesus first preached the good news, followed by His apostles. How was the authority of their new message confirmed? By the accompanying signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Spirit.

So then, if the miraculous gifts, including tongues, were meant to confirm the *authority* of the apostles’ new message, then those gifts were only necessary during the actual *ministry* of the apostles, as they were first delivering this new message to the church. When the apostles passed off the scene, their miraculous signs passed off with them. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 we read lists of spiritual gifts. The gift of apostle is mentioned. Now we know that there are no longer apostles. That gift was temporary. Likewise, we no longer have the apostolic miraculous gifts. Those gifts were also temporary. They weren’t meant to continue throughout the history of the church, just as the gift of apostleship wasn’t meant to continue past the original apostles.

*A Sign for Israel that the Church was Replacing Judaism*¹⁴

The third and last purpose of tongues was to serve as a sign against the Jews that God’s new agent of change in the world was the church and not Judaism. Under the Old Covenant, God chose the nation Israel to be His special instrument in the world. God planned that from Israel would come the Messiah, the Savior of the whole world. But we know that when Jesus came, the Jews as a nation rejected Him. What was the result? In Matthew 21 Jesus told the parable of the vineyard to show the Jews that they were rejecting their Messiah, and what the consequences would be. Jesus concluded in v. 43, “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it.” When the Pharisees realized Jesus was talking about them, they sought to arrest Him and destroy Him, which they eventually did.

What happened on the day of Pentecost? The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, in fulfillment of the promise of Jesus, and the church was born. The Old Covenant of the Jewish nation was no longer God’s program in the world; the church under the leadership of Jesus Christ was God’s new program. The gift of tongues on Pentecost symbolized that the gospel was open to everyone, from every nation in the world. And those foreign tongues being spoken in Jerusalem served as a rebuke to the Jews, as a sign against them, for rejecting their Messiah. It was as if God was telling the Jews, “If you don’t want to listen to the gospel, the message of My Son, then I’ll send you foreign words which you won’t be able to understand.”

This very act of God was predicted earlier in the OT, in Isaiah 28. In the context of that chapter, the prophet Isaiah was pronouncing judgment upon Israel for rejecting the word of the Lord. Instead of accepting God’s warning and repenting, the people mocked the message of Isaiah (vv. 9–10). How

¹⁴ This replacement is only a change of focus and is not permanent. In the future God will turn to Israel once again, convert the Jews, and set up Christ’s millennial reign in Jerusalem, in fulfillment of all the OT promises to Israel concerning this future kingdom (see Romans 11).

would God respond? According to vv. 11–13, since God had sent His word to His people, but they had rejected and mocked His words as nonsense, God would speak to them in a language they could not understand. It would sound like nonsense to them. This would be an act of judgment against their unbelief that would propel them into captivity.

In the immediate context, this is a prediction of the Assyrians. Because Israel rejected the word of the Lord, God sent the Assyrians against them in judgment. From then on Israel was under the domination of foreign nations, who spoke strange languages which Israel could not understand.

However, the NT applies this prophecy to what happened in the early days of the church. Remember that on Pentecost as the disciples spoke with other tongues, they were mocked by some of the Jews as being drunk. The tongues were a sign against the Jews of Jerusalem that day. Then Peter preached, telling the Jews that they must believe in Jesus their Messiah in order to be saved. Salvation is only in Jesus.

In Acts 10, Cornelius and his household spoke with tongues as a sign for another group of Jews, this time believers who were amazed (v. 45) because they still did not understand that God wanted to save Gentiles apart from Judaism. When Peter returned to Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians rebuked him for eating with Gentiles (11:3). But when Peter told them how the Gentiles received the same gift of Holy Spirit as they did on Pentecost, the Jewish Christians calmed down and finally glorified God. The gift of tongues was a sign against the doubt of these Jews.

The third and last time tongues are mentioned in Acts is in chapter 19. In this context, some disciples of John the Baptist receive the Holy Spirit. Even the baptism of John was not enough to be saved. That was only a baptism of repentance in preparation for receiving the Messiah. The baptism of the Spirit was the result of true salvation in Jesus Christ, which places the believer into the church, the Body of Christ. So tongues were a sign that Judaism was no longer adequate. Being a Jewish proselyte was no longer adequate. The baptism of John was no longer adequate. Only one thing was now adequate: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ which would bring salvation and the indwelling ministry of the Spirit to join the believer to God's *new* instrument in the world, the church, which is the Body of Christ.

The last place we see the application of Isa 28:11 is in 1 Cor 14:21–22. In quoting this OT passage, Paul makes it clear that the main purpose of the gift of tongues was as a sign for unbelievers.

When was it necessary for God to give this sign to unbelieving Jews, proving to them that He was now shifting His attention from working with Israel to building the church? At the beginning of this shift, in the early days of the church. When was it necessary for God to confirm the church as His new instrument in the world? During the early days of the church, the time of transition from Judaism to Christianity. Once that transition was made, the sign of tongues which marked that transition was no longer necessary. That's why we only read about tongues at the end of Mark, which marks the transition into the church age, in Acts, which is Luke's historical account of that transition period, and in 1 Corinthians, which was one of Paul's earliest epistles written during the same transition period. In his later epistles to the Romans and Ephesians, while he discusses the gifts and work of the Spirit in the church, Paul does not mention tongues at all. Why not? Because they were not part of the Spirit's long-term work in and through the church during the present age.

They were already passing off the scene. Likewise, in the later pastoral epistles (1, 2 Timothy, Titus), which contain a lot of instruction about church leadership and how to conduct the church, there is no mention whatsoever of any miraculous gifts.

The Function of Tongues: They Were Revelatory

There is one last point to make, and it is crucial. I mentioned this in part one, and it bears repeating here. Not only did miraculous gifts like tongues serve the purpose of being signs in the early church, they also functioned as *conveyors of divine revelation* to the church. Before His death, burial, resurrection, and return to the right hand of the Father, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, who would teach the apostles, cause them to remember Jesus' words, guide them into all the truth, and reveal to them things to come (John 14:26, 16:13–15). On Pentecost, tongues and prophecy worked together to reveal new truth about God and His plan to save people through the death and resurrection of His Son. Tongues and prophecy were functionally equivalent as sources of divine revelation (1 Cor 14:5–6). The reason Paul says prophecy was better than tongues was because prophecy edified immediately, while tongues didn't. Tongues required the additional gift of interpretation in order to edify the listeners. But both tongues and prophecy functioned as conveyors of new revelation from God to His church.

When did the revelatory gifts of apostle, prophet, tongues, interpretation, prophecy, word of wisdom, and word of knowledge operate? According to Eph 2:20, the apostles and prophets ministered during the foundation-laying stage of the church. They laid Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of the church through their apostolic preaching of salvation through His cross. They received this message by divine revelation through the Holy Spirit (Eph 3:5). How long did this foundation stage last? Until the apostles fully received and delivered their message from God "once," or "once for all," to the church (Jude 3). This period concluded with the last installment of revelation, the Book of Revelation, which John delivered to the church at the end of the first century. It is not accidental that the last book of the NT warns against adding to God's Word (Rev 22:18–19). After the foundation was laid, the gifts of apostle and prophet, along with the accompanying miraculous revelatory gifts needed during that stage, ceased. History attests to this fact through the affirmation of the early Church Fathers.

Conclusion

The NT gift of tongues served as a sign to authenticate the authority of Christ, the apostles, and the church as God's new program. Tongues also functioned as conveyors of new revelation to the early church. After serving these purposes, tongues ceased. If this is true, then what do we see and hear today? It cannot be biblical tongues for two main reasons. First, NT tongues as defined by Acts 2 were actual foreign languages miraculously spoken by those with no previous knowledge. Second, NT tongues as described in 1 Corinthians were conveyors of divine revelation, functionally equivalent to prophecy, and the giving of new revelation ceased with the writing of the last book of the NT.

So what *do* we see and hear today, if not biblical tongues? We see in most cases sincere and well-meaning Christians who believe they are having an authentic biblical experience, but unfortunately are not. We must be very careful as Bible-believing Christians. We must never *base* our beliefs on a

feeling or experience. We must never say as the basis of belief, “But I had this wonderful experience!” or, “I had the most wonderful feeling!” God does not give experiences or feelings that run counter to the teaching of His Word. We must never make our experiences the measure of truth. Doing this is extremely dangerous. After all, Satan himself can appear as an angel of light to fool people, and Satan’s servants can disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Cor 11:14). Instead of simply asking, “What do I feel?” or “What am I experiencing?” we should ask ourselves another question, “How do my feelings and experiences measure up against Scripture?” Only the Bible is God’s final authority for the faith and practices of His church.