



# BIBLICAL TONGUES

*Clear Teaching  
On A Confusing Issue*

---

by Chuck Gianotti  
July 2000



# **BIBLICAL TONGUES**

**Clear Teaching On A Confusing Subject**

By Chuck Gianotti

July 2000

Version 1.01

## Acknowledgments

As with most writings, this one is dependent upon many sources. The first and most important is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the “Truth”, and in this booklet we endeavor to know His way of truth more perfectly. Seeking what is true and not simply experiential has been my passion from shortly before I became a Christ-follower.

In presenting the teaching herein, I am dependent upon many sources (some of which are unnamed articles, quotes in my files, private conversations—all of which are, unfortunately, nameless, etc.) . Where I have drawn from known authors, this is duly noted.

For editorial assistance, I appreciate the painstaking work of Pauline Hawkins and Jim Mayer for proofing, style suggestions and challenging me to communicate clearly.

Finally, I am grateful for the many folks who have struggled with this potentially divisive subject, who have the courage to challenge the status quo,. This booklet is for you to help you find God’s good and perfect will.

*Chuck Gianotti*

# TONGUES

## Table of Contents

Overview .....	1
Tongues Through History.....	2
Tongues in Scripture .....	6
Objections .....	15
Cautions .....	17
Final thoughts.....	18
Bibliography.....	20
Appendix I: List of acronyms and abbreviations.....	21

# TONGUES

## OVERVIEW

A young man walks into the church with cautious expectations—his friends say this is where the Spirit is moving with power. As the service begins, the crowd becomes animated. All of a sudden someone in the front breaks out loudly into an emotional frenzy, speaking a strange kind of language. Your friend leans over and whispers excitedly, “This is just like the day of Pentecost.” Before long, more people join in and finally most people in the service are either speaking out or singing in this strange kind of utterance or singing—sometimes English, sometimes this other “language.”

Soon, this young man begins to seek this same experience. It seems like a good thing; certainly those who are involved say this releases their spirits to worship more freely. He pours over the scripture and talks with the pastor. He even tries to mimic what he heard. Strangely, he feels foolish. Why doesn't anyone else feel this way?

He is open to it, but he doesn't want to fake it. But, since he does not sense the Lord's empowering, he begins to turn his critical eye inward. There must be something wrong with him that God has not blessed him with the special gift, they call “tongues.” He tries believing really hard, but to no avail. Discouraged, he quietly fades out and goes back to his former life. Faith didn't work for him, he concludes.

The issue of tongues has divided the evangelical community, becoming the symbolic, if not definitive, difference between “charismatic” and “non-charismatic” churches.

What exactly is this phenomenon and why is it so divisive? Two perspectives epitomize the opposing views, though there is a wide range of views in between. One individual writes:

For me ... the gift of tongues turned out to be the gift of praise. As I used the unknown language which God had given me, I felt rising in me the love, the awe, the adoration, pure and uncontingent, that I had not been able to achieve in thought out prayer.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, George Gardiner, a former Pentecostal adherent writes:

The seeker for experience goes back through the ritual again and again, but begins to discover something; ecstatic experience, like drug-addiction, requires larger and larger doses to satisfy ... Eventually, there is a

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by J. MacArthur in *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective*, p. 156-57.

crisis and a decision is made; he will sit on the back seats and be a spectator, 'fake it', or go on in the hope that everything will eventually be as it was. The most tragic decision is to quit and in the quitting abandon all things spiritual as fraudulent. The spectators are frustrated, the fakers suffer guilt, the hoping are pitiable, and the quitters are a tragedy. No, such movements [i.e. of tongues] are not harmless.<sup>2</sup>

How we approach this subject can pre-determine the end results, so we need to be careful how we begin. We should not begin with individual experience and then find Biblical passages to support that experience. Nor should we use experience as the basis for determining the rightness or wrongness of an interpretation of scripture. Proverbs attests to the fact that experience itself is not the measure of truth (e.g. "... *there is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof is the way of death.*" 14:12 emphasis added). Experienced based interpretation can, at best, color our understanding beyond what the scripture allows or at worst result in twisting scripture to fit our purposes.

Our goal in this paper is to determine what Biblical tongues are and contrast it with much of what is being promoted today. Initially, we need to assess what it is we are talking about. The historical record provides an overall picture of the phenomenon called "tongues". Following this, our analysis takes an inductive approach to studying God's word, seeking to understand it properly and consistently with the Holy Spirit's help. Then we will evaluate the phenomenon (in general) and the present day experiences (in particular).

## **TONGUES THROUGH HISTORY**

Historically, "tongues" or "glossolalia" (a broader term for the phenomenon based on the Greek words "to speak" and "tongue") has not been unique to Christianity. The concept of "spirit controlled" speech (whether real or purported) in an unknown language or gibberish was familiar to many different religious persuasions.

### ***Before New Testament Times***

Among Pagans, the earliest recorded occurrences were about 1100 B.C. when a frenzied "god-controlled" speech occurred in a youth, though not related to the God of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Information for this and the following historical information, if not specifically noted, are from Dr. John Hannah, Professor of Historical Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, "History of Doctrine" Course notes. This fairly common information found in many Church History books or books dealing with tongues.*

Plato (429-347 B.C.) revealed knowledge of “religious, ecstatic speech.” Virgil (70-19 B.C.) speaks of a priestess on the isle of Delos uttering an ecstatic, unknown language to the god Apollo. Many historians believe the mystery religions of the Greco-Roman world during the centuries around the birth of Christianity frequently practiced glossolalia. This would include the cult of Osiris in Egypt, the Mithra cult, the Eleusinian, the Dionysian and Orphic cults and many others. The phenomenon was also evident in the widespread occult practices during that time.

In all these cases, unintelligible utterance was given, presumably under the control of the god or some spiritual influence. “Union with the god” was often involved. Of course, these reports do not prove the historical reality of these experiences, but they do show there was at least a belief in the existence of glossolalia before and outside of Christianity and probably that it was widespread.

Among Jews, there is no Old Testament (OT) historical record of people experiencing glossolalia. The prophets often spoke under the influence of the Spirit of God, but to assume that this was tongues forces a preconceived notion back onto the scriptures. There is no reason to believe their Spirit controlled utterances were anything other than the understood language of the day.

Angels in the OT always used languages readily understood by the listeners with no attention given to the unusualness of their speech.

Some have asserted that passages such as Joel 2:28-32 (quoted in Acts 2:16-21)

*And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.*

and Isaiah 28:11 (quoted in I Corinthians 14:21)

*Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people.*

refer to supernatural language speaking. Yet, these passages either make no mention of glossolalia as an unknown tongue or refer to a known human language (albeit foreign to the listeners).

### ***During New Testament times***

There is no record that Christ ever spoke in tongues. The apostles apparently did speak in tongues at times (I Corinthians 14:18 *I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.* See also Acts 2). Other New Testament (NT) believers experienced this phenomenon as well (see the conversions of Cornelius in Acts 10 and disciples of John the Baptist in Acts 19). Some NT believers abused the tongues gift as well (see I Corinthians 14). The frequency of “tongues

speaking” in the NT record diminishes in the later writings as evidenced by the scarcity of references to it. Mark 16:17 (tongues promised), Acts 2, 10, 19 (tongues given) and I Corinthians 12-14 (tongues misused) are the only NT references to glossolalia, all of which are fairly early on in the NT chronology.

### *The early centuries after NT times*

Immediately following the NT period, most historians agree that the use of spiritual gifts (including tongues) declined beginning in the 1st century, though explanations vary as to the cause. In the second and third centuries, little remains in patristic literature<sup>4</sup> concerning the “charismatic” gifts.<sup>5</sup>

John Thomas Nichol, a Pentecostal writer, admits to this fading out when he states: “Whatever the reason it is quite clear that the spontaneous ministry of prophecy, tongues and signs ... regarded by the early Christians as immediately authorized by the divine action of the Holy Spirit ... was being superseded by the permanently appointed 'official' ministry of the presbyter-bishops of Apostolic [sic] appointment ... In short, while the charismatic gifts did not disappear entirely, they were incompatible with the regular order of liturgical service, therefore they soon dropped out of it.”<sup>6</sup> While we disagree with Nichol’s explanation, it is clear that even he recognizes the historical fact that tongues faded in time.

Another Pentecostal writer, Michael Harper admits: “The gifts finally did disappear from the pages of history”<sup>7</sup>

Yet, the most noted theologian of the early centuries, Augustine, writing in 354-430 A.D., interpreted the decline of tongues differently: “In the earliest time, the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed; and they spake 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, and to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. The thing was done for a betokening and it passed away.”<sup>8</sup>

In the early centuries of the Church, the only significant record of glossolalia is found in the sect called Montanism (followers of Montanus). Most of what we know of this group is recorded by the early Church historian, Eusebius.<sup>9</sup> Monta-

---

<sup>4</sup> *Patristic writings were letters, commentaries and histories written by early Christian writers in the immediate centuries following the Apostles.*

<sup>5</sup> *Tertullian and Irenaeus (both in the latter part of 2nd century) made brief but vague mention of tongues.*

<sup>6</sup> *Pentecostalism, p. 20*

<sup>7</sup> *As At the Beginning, p. 19*

<sup>8</sup> *Quoted in Hannah 2:6*

<sup>9</sup> *Eusebius, V.XV.*

nus prior to conversion to Christianity was a priest of the ecstatic cult of Cybeles. Speaking in tongues was prevalent in that cult. After conversion, he claimed to have received fuller revelation of the Spirit than previously possessed by the Church. Because of his stress on new revelations delivered through unknown utterances, he is frequently charged with acting as the Paraclete (i.e. Holy Spirit). Associated with him were two wealthy prophetesses, who left their husbands to follow Montanus.

Eusebius writes: "... he was carried away in spirit and wrought up into certain kind of frenzy and irregular ecstasy, raving and speaking and uttering strange things ..." Because of this and his many bizarre teachings in other areas, the early Church eventually labeled him a heretic.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Middle Ages***

Individuals began to appear in the historical record with glossolalia attributed to them. Vincent Ferrer (1350-1419), Francis Xavier (1506-1562), the Camisards French prophets (a group of 500 men and women who, it is thought, began seeing visions and speaking in tongues), Jansenites (around 1731) are examples. Hannah notes concerning the Camisards: "So fanatical were these tongues folks that they declared they were not injured in falls from trees, and that lights would guide them to places of safety in danger. Thousands of them heard voices from heaven in the air they claimed."<sup>11</sup>

### ***From Middle Ages through the 1800's***

The Shakers (mid 1700's) were another group, led by Ann Lee who claimed to speak in 70 tongues and claimed to be the female Christ. Edward Irving (1792-1834) and his followers are noteworthy. He denied the sinlessness of Christ and was removed from being a Presbyterian minister. He claimed to be an "angel" of the Church. This was the first case of a movement where the "charismatic" gifts became the norm, though Irving himself did not speak in tongues. This group was the first to connect tongues with Spirit baptism as the norm.

Mormons (founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith and who deny many basic fundamental Biblical truths such as the trinity) at times have taught the use of the miraculous gifts including tongues. Islam at times has included tongues as part of their religious practice.

### ***Early 1900's until the present***

There was a resurgence of the so-called charismatic manifestations at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The modern Pentecostal movement (hence the modern tongues speaking) finds its roots around the end of the 1800's and begin-

---

<sup>10</sup> Gromacki, p. 13-14

<sup>11</sup> Hannah 2:7

ning of the 1900's, with men such as Richard G. Spurling (a Baptist) and Charles F. Parham, who has been called the "Father of the modern Pentecostal movement."<sup>12</sup> Agnes Ozman was the first individual in the movement purportedly to have received the experience of tongues as a result of specifically seeking a baptism in the Holy Spirit with the expectation of speaking in tongues. Eventually this led to the establishing of the Azusa Street Mission.

Around 1955-1960 an emphasis on tongues and charismatic gifts broke out from the Pentecostal camp and began to infiltrate other denominations. Major "happenings" took place at Duquesne University (1967) and at Notre Dame and Kansas City (1977). In 1975, 20,000 Catholics met at Notre Dame to hear Belgian Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens endorse the movement.

Currently, glossolalia is reportedly being emphasized in many quarters in a wide variety of manifestations. Much disagreement is apparent, but all will agree that the phenomenon is widespread—even among Roman Catholics, some Baptists, mainline denominations as well as many non-Christian (e.g. Moslems, Mormons, etc.). One of the newer attempts to use the "charismatic" gifts is found in John Wimber's Vineyard Movement, which likely is an outgrowth of Fuller Theological Seminary's experiential workshop on spiritual gifts.

### ***Conclusion***

Glossolalia is not unique to Christianity. We have seen that the mere existence of it does not prove it is from God in every case or in any case. This experience, whatever it is, is found historically where it is obviously not related to the God of the Bible. The phenomenon occurred before, during and after the time of the NT, though it faded out shortly after (during?) the first century until isolated occurrences happened around the 1300's.

The mere existence of glossolalia does not prove it is from God in every case or in any case.

Most records up to the 1900's concern fringe groups or are poorly substantiated. Other doctrines or practices involved in these groups were questionable. It is only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that there has been widespread resurgence of "tongues."

## **TONGUES IN SCRIPTURE**

### ***Definition of Tongues***

The meaning of a word is determined by considering several factors. First, there is the manner in which the author uses the word and what meaning he apparently gives it. For this we look at the immediate context, how the author

---

<sup>12</sup> See Gromacki, p. 25

uses the word in other places and how the word is used in other ancient literature.

*Glossa* is the Greek word translated “tongue”, “tongues”, or “language” in the NT. The standard range of meanings based on how the term is used in Classical and Biblical Greek can be identified as follows<sup>13</sup>:

- Physical organ in the mouth (occurs six times in NT)
- Symbolic of speech (ten times in the NT)
- Known human language (at least seven times in NT)
- Obscure verbal expressions, which require explanation (whether this meaning occurs in the NT is discussed below).

Which meaning is intended in a particular passage depends on how the word is used in that passage.

### *Usage of Glossa in the Scriptures*

Since the OT was written in Hebrew, we don't find the Greek word *glossa* used in original Hebrew scriptures. But, the Septuagint<sup>14</sup> (which was a translation of the OT into Greek around 400 B.C. by the Hebrew and Greek scholars of the day) used the word over 150 times. There *glossa* is used entirely in the first three meanings as outlined above. Not one clear case of *glossa* can be found referring to an ecstatic or non-human language. In every case in which it refers to speech, a known human language is in view.

In the NT, written in Greek, the only passages where the exact meaning of glossa is disputed are Mark 16:17, Acts 2, 10, 19 and I Corinthians 12-14. All other passages clearly fall within the first three meanings listed above.

*And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues... Mark 16:17*

In this passage no conclusive meaning can be determined here for the phrase “... new tongue ...” Some say the term “new” means the tongue is unknown language or an angelic language. But the use of the word “new” could just as easily refer to a known human language *new* to the user. There is no contextual persuasion here that would sway the judgment either way.

*For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. 1 Corinthians 14:2*

---

<sup>13</sup> *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* p.1078ff.

<sup>14</sup> Also, referred to as LXX.

We will address this passage later and show that this is really a criticism of the Corinthians. The New English Bible translates this: "... *language of ecstasy* ..." This is an unwarranted paraphrase, for the word "ecstasy" does not appear in the underlying Greek and is nowhere else found in scripture attributed to people who speak in tongues.

On the day of Pentecost, this pivotal experience in the life of Christ's disciples, tongues were clearly evidenced:

*When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?"*  
Acts 2:6-8

The writer of Acts indicates that these tongues were known human languages, supernaturally endowed by the Holy Spirit. At that time many Jews and Jewish converts were visiting Jerusalem from as many as 16 different geographical origins representing many different language groups (Acts 2:9-11). These men heard the Apostolic preaching in their own dialects. The Greek used here, *dialektos* clearly refers to known human languages). This was not a miracle of hearing, as some would suppose. These expatriate Jews were amazed that such men as Galileans (i.e. uneducated, "country boys") could speak all these different languages. The people who expressed scorn and accused them of being drunk (2:13) were most likely the Palestinian Jews who did not understand these foreign languages.

Yes, there was considerable emotional upheaval, but that seems to be the case of those hearing the tongues, not those speaking in tongues: *Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."* (Acts 2:12-13). Some suppose the appearance of drunkenness was due to the supposed ecstatic nature of the disciples' experience. But, a more reasonable understanding of the reaction is that those who "made fun" were local Jews who did not understand the languages being spoken by these unlearned Galileans.

The next occurrence of tongues is found in Acts 10:46, which records the endowment of tongues upon the Gentile centurion Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles. This instance is clearly linked to Acts 2 and therefore we would naturally conclude that *glossa* is the same tongues as in Acts 2 (that is, a human language). Far from being presented as the normative experience for all Christians, this event confirmed that the door to the Gentiles was indeed opened by the Holy Spirit. The Gentiles received the Holy Spirit just like the Jewish believers at Pentecost and the Jews were reassured that indeed the Gentiles should be welcomed into the Church.

In Acts 19 (the record of the conversion of John the Baptist's disciples), again there is little compelling reason to see tongues mentioned there as anything other than a known human language similar to that of Acts 2.

The crux of this discussion on tongues centers on I Corinthians 12-14. Interpretations vary, but the burden of proof lies with those who would see a different kind of language (i.e. angelic or otherwise). The clear meaning of tongues in the other passages lends credence to the view that tongues in this passage is a known human language. We look at 1 Corinthians below.

One might say that extra-Biblical (i.e. outside of the Bible) usage should inform here. *Glossa* in Classical Greek literature does at times refer to non-linguistic, "spirit-controlled" utterances. However this does not mandate that the word *must* have that particular meaning in the Bible as well, for *glossa* in Classical Greek was also used in reference to known languages.

Based on this brief word study, the evidence suggests that the term *glossa* as used in the Scriptures means a known human language and therefore would suggest that unless otherwise proved, it means this also in 1 Corinthians. Before, we can conclusively demonstrate this, let us consider first of all the purpose of tongues as given by God.

### ***Purpose of Tongues in Scripture***

There appears to be basically four purposes for tongues stated or implied in scripture. First, tongues were given for the purpose of **communication**. As we have already seen, Acts 2 clearly indicates that tongues was used to communicate the Good News to expatriate Jews of other language groups (*We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues. 2:11*)

The book of First Corinthians (which contains the major teaching on tongues) was written to a church located in Corinth, a major port city. The Christians there had much exposure to people of various language groups, due to the international shipping that passed, by canal, through the Isthmus of Corinth. The value of tongues speaking for corporate worship and preaching would be obvious in light of the sailors and travelers frequenting that city.

Second, tongues were given for a **sign of judgment**. Isaiah the prophet warned the Old Testament Jews that God would bring judgment on Israel using a people who spoke a foreign language. Isaiah 28:11 says: *Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people*. In context this evidently would be the Assyrians. Israel was aghast at the thought that God (being infinitely holy) could or would use Gentiles to discipline Israel. Since Israel wouldn't discipline herself, the foreign speech was a sign of God's judgment. Assyria did, in fact, come and defeat Israel and take them away into captivity.

In Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost, tongues, besides being a communication tool, was a sign of God's judgment on the nation Israel. Because Israel rejected Jesus as her Messiah, God was now offering the Good News to people of other language groups. In fact, as outlined in Acts, the gospel was soon to escape the birthing place of Jerusalem and Israel and go out to the Samaritans and even the whole world.

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* Acts 1:8

Instead of God using the Jews, He was reaching past them to begin working through the Gentiles, using “non-Jewish” languages—all because Israel rebelled against God (see Romans 10-11). Historically, we see that God, in fact, began to use the Gentiles (i.e. Christians) as a means of bringing Israel back to Himself (see Romans 11:30-31). Tongues at Pentecost was a subtle judgment on Israel that they no longer were God's primary instrument in reaching the nations.

The Apostle Paul quotes that passage from Isaiah (seen above) and applies it to the Corinthian context.

*In the Law it is written: Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,” says the Lord. Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers... 1 Corinthians 14:21-22*

Tongues speaking would be a sign to unbelieving Jews (in Corinth and everywhere) of a coming judgment for unbelieving Jews (in the same way as foreign speech was a sign to the unbelieving Jews in Isaiah's time). The fact that tongues were evident among the Corinthian believers would doubtlessly remind the Jewish community in Corinth that God was now working with Gentiles (other language groups)—once again a sign of judgment on Israel.

Third, tongues were given for the purpose of **edification** of the church. As with all spiritual gifts, tongues were not given for an individual's (i.e. the tongues speaker) own benefit.

*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.* 1 Corinthians 12:7

These are body life gifts to be used for building up the body of believers. The purpose was not to bless or edify the individual who possessed the gift. The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul addresses this concern and explains that self-edification was precisely what was wrong with the Corinthian abuse of tongues!

*For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit...He*

*who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.* 1 Corinthians 14:2, 4

As Joseph Dillow points out “... referring to I Corinthians 14:4 does not help us in the discussion of the purpose of the gift, because what this passage describes is an accompanying product of the exercise of the gift. Any man is edified as he exercises his gift. But, we can't say, for example, that because the man who has the gift of evangelism is edified as he evangelizes, the purpose of the gift of evangelism is personal edification. When Paul says that ‘... *he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself*’, he isn't commending the Corinthians for their spirituality! He is actually rebuking them for their misuse of the gift.”<sup>15</sup>

The difficulty some have with this passage may lie in the terseness of Paul's language. It may be helpful to consider a similar approach Paul used in chastising the Corinthians regarding their abuse of the Lord's Supper in. In soundly rebuking them, he puts his criticism this way:

*“As you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.”* 1 Corinthians 11:21

Paul is emphatically *not* commending their behavior. He is simply stating what occurred, and that is the Corinthians' problem. They were abusing the Lord's Supper. This way of communicating his point is exactly how he approaches the abuse of tongues in I Corinthians 14:2 and 4. In both cases the description of their behavior constitutes a rebuke.

As a spiritual gift, tongues have the purpose of edifying the Church (I Corinthians 12:7, 14:12). In order for this to happen in a church meeting, they must be manifested by no more than three speakers and must be interpreted.

*If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.* 14:27-28.

This mandate provides for both the foreign audience who can understand the foreign language spoken as well as the local audience.

In worship and teaching, understanding and clarity must rule the day and not confusion. This is why the Lord emphasizes the use of the mind in the passage and the necessity of interpretations. Without understanding, of what real value are tongues to the Church? This is the “argument” of chapter 14. Does it release the Spirit in us to praise God? The passage makes no mention of this. Allowing the mouth to give out a series of syllables does not necessarily aid “Praying in the Spirit”.

---

<sup>15</sup> Dillow, pp. 78-79

Indeed, a spirit-controlled person is characterized by control of his tongue and his thoughts (see I Corinthians 14:28-33). To relinquish this control in the name of “higher” spirituality may in reality reflect fleshly or soulish control! Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23) and, therefore controlling one’s prayers is not “un-spiritual.” Self-control, for the Christian, is Christ control.

Fourth, tongues, as one of the sign gifts, served to **authenticate** the ministry of the early Christians, particularly the Apostles, and the spread of the Word of God.

*The signs of a true Apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.* II Corinthians 12:12

*God also bearing witness with them [i.e. the apostles], both by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.* Hebrews 2:4

So we see, there are four purposes for tongues, as outlined in Scripture: communication, judgment, edification and authentication.

### ***Tongues Are Played Down in Scripture***

Though the NT does not strictly forbid speaking in tongues (*Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.* I Corinthians 14:39), it nonetheless does not emphasize tongues. In fact, Jesus, whom we are to model, never spoke in tongues.

I Corinthians 14:19 down plays tongues by a scale of 1/2,000 in terms of its edification value compared with prophecy. The passage “... *I wish that you all spoke in tongues ...*” (I Corinthians 14:5) is on the same level as “*I wish that all men were even as I myself [i.e. unmarried]*” (I Corinthians 7:7). The Apostle Paul frequently used rhetorical statements for emphasis.

None of us would take the latter as a command or even an emphasis of scripture toward remaining single or becoming single. Rather, in context, it was a wise preference under the existing persecution for people to be freed from the concerns of married life (see also Romans 9:3). Neither, therefore, is the former a command to speak in tongues or even a norm to follow. Indeed, wouldn't it be great if all of us had true tongues and a ministry like Paul's to the wide range of peoples and language groups? But, in the context, the assertion is simply a strong way to emphasize the more beneficial ministry of prophecy.

I Corinthians was written to a people who had serious factions, were allowing gross immorality, taking each other to court, etc. Focusing on tongues was just one more gross abuse in the Corinthian Church.

Therefore, today churches should downplay the practice of tongues. A local church that does so is not necessarily spiritual. Ironically, such a focus may be understood as a sign of carnality!

### *Duration of Tongues*

Some feel the widespread experience of glossolalia proves the on-going validity of tongues. Others assert that tongues ceased with the completion of Scriptures. In Mark's gospel the gift of tongues is promised along with the ability to pick up deadly snakes and drink poison without harm.

*And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.* Mark 16:17-18

This writer knows of no one who has successfully and repeatedly exhibited these latter two abilities. In the context, these capacities would serve well the early witnesses of Christ in the spread of the Gospel. There would be much opposition both from worldly and demonic authorities and the need for special language abilities as well as special resistance to satanic opposition would be obvious.

While Biblical history gives evidence that laying on hands for certain healing as promised in Mark 16 did take place early on, the record is clear that it did not continue—even in the ministry of Paul and the others. The Apostles encountered various and normal types of sicknesses and maladies which they earlier were able to heal, but later were unable to heal. Paul himself told Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach's sake (I Timothy 5:23) and left Trophimus sick at Miletus (II Timothy 4:20)<sup>16</sup>.

Tongues is one of the “sign” gifts, whose function was particularly important since the NT was not yet in complete and authorized written form.

*The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance.* 2 Corinthians 12:12

*God also testified to it [the message of salvation] by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit ...* Hebrews 2:4

II Corinthians 12:12 and Hebrews 2:4 identifies tongues as one of the sign gifts that had the very definite purpose of authenticating the Word of God

Did tongues cease by divine mandate or was it simply a matter of its usefulness being diminished? Paul, at the end of the great Love chapter, is thought by some to assert that tongues ceased when the NT was completed.

---

<sup>16</sup> See also II Corinthians 12:8-9, Galatians 4:12-14, Philippians 2:26-30

*...But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.* 1 Corinthians 13:8[emphasis mine]

Some commentators refer to the middle “voice” of the Greek verb in contrast to the voice of the other verbs in the verse, to show that tongues ceased in and of themselves. But, this grammatical understanding is not as certain as some would like, as suggested by other commentators.

Some have suggested that the “complete” (KJV) or “perfect” (NASB) in verse 10 refers to the completion of the NT or the coming of Christ. *But when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears* 1 Corinthians 13:10. They conclude that by divine mandate tongues ceased when the NT was completed. But, there is very little to determine from context that this is what the “complete” means. It could refer to the new heavens and new earth. Little is said elsewhere about the duration of tongues. This writer feels the passage is not meant to give a divine mandate about the cessation of tongues. Rather, it is meant to contrast the ultimate inferiority of spiritual gifts in comparison with or apart from the attribute of love.

It is very tenuous to build a dogmatic view based on a minute and controversial dissecting of a verse in such a poetic section of Scripture as I Cor 13:8 and 10. The reality of the matter, though, is that Biblical tongues do appear to have faded out toward the completion of the NT canon. Our historical study above shows there was a purported resurgence beginning around the 1300's, but we believe this was not Biblical tongues, but more akin to pagan gibberish.

It would seem safe to conclude that, based on the divine purposes of tongues and the facts of Biblical and post-Biblical history, tongues indeed were temporary. They ceased not because of Biblical decree as such, but their Biblically defined purpose was fulfilled and therefore tongues naturally faded from use.

However, the Scriptures do not absolutely mandate against tongues usage in the present day. God is certainly able to do as He likes. If a person began speaking in another human language which he had never before learned and there was an interpreter present who knew the language to translate (and verify) the message, who could deny the work of God?

Does this mean that tongues today are of God? Not necessarily! The purposes of tongues must be present and tongues must be known human languages. Anything else is un-Biblical.

### ***Tongues Regulated***

I Corinthians 14:28ff indicates strict regulation for tongues. The commands given in this section of scripture lead us to conclude that the use of tongues, as with all spiritual gifts, should be done in a controlled manner. The idea that a

person has no control or must “follow the prompting of the Spirit” (as some claim) is foreign to the text.

Tongues are to be regulated—only two or three should speak in tongues in a meeting. If no interpreter is present, the would-be tongues speaker must remain quiet, speaking to himself and to God (vs. 28). This does not involve speaking quietly in tongues for silence is demanded; and this speaking to oneself implies use of mental faculties (otherwise we have the ludicrous situation of a person “speaking to himself” and not knowing what he is saying to himself).

Tongues are to be judged by the others in the church (implied from 14:29, 32). This is not unspiritual or wrongful judgment. Tongues are to benefit others or else not to be used. This experience must be tongues of the Bible in order for it to be a valid part of the Christian experience: a known human language inspired by God used according to the Biblical regulations for the Biblical purposes.

## OBJECTIONS

### *Aren't tongues an angelic language?*

I Corinthians 13:1 says, “*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels ...*” Some believe tongues is a non-human language and the private language of prayer that releases the Spirit. But this very poetic portion of scripture uses a common figure of speech to express that no matter how eloquent the ability to communicate, without love we are nothing. The passage is not a doctrinal statement about the existence of angelic language. Rather, the focus is Love.

This poetic method of speaking by hypothetical extremes is seen elsewhere in Scripture. For example, in I Corinthians 13:2 the apostle says “... *if ... I know all mysteries and all knowledge*”. The point here is not that it is possible to know all mysteries. The value of Love is being emphasized by an extreme comparison.

The literary term for this is “merism” where the writer uses two opposite extremes to include the whole realm in between<sup>17</sup>. We use this often in such phrases as “they came from near and far” (meaning widespread) or “they came, young and old” (meaning, a wide variety of ages). “*Though, I speak with tongues of men and of angels ...*” (meaning, however eloquent I might speak).

This use of merism is found often in the Scriptures. Consider Psalm 138:8-9 (KJV): “*If I ascend to heaven, Thou are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold Thou are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Thy hand will lead me ...*” This passage is making no statement about the feasibility of doing these things. It simply but dramatically states

---

<sup>17</sup> Bullinger's *Figures of Speech in the Bible*, p.

that the Lord will be with us always and everywhere; there is no escaping Him. In similar fashion, the Apostle Paul states that despite having the most excellent speech, a man without love is nothing.

This is the only text that refers to “angelic language” as such. As mentioned earlier, whenever Scriptures refer to angels speaking, the language is always a known human language of the people. Never is there any hint that they use a “heavenly” or superior language.

### ***Aren't tongues a private prayer language?***

Modern tongues speakers often say the experience enhances their private prayer life, releasing the spirit for pure worship and praise. The mind, they feel, hinders the process but the spirit has free reign as God leads. After all, Romans 8:26 says “... *for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*” However, if the Spirit's praying and interceding is too deep for words, then we question whether any verbiage is implied here at all. The communication is simply not utterable.

I Corinthians 14:28 states “... *if there is not an interpreter (i.e. of tongues), let him (the tongues speaker) keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.*” As mentioned earlier, the alternative to public use of tongues along with interpretation is silence or praying inaudibly. And this praying should involve the mind.

Various passages in scripture do refer to “praying in the Spirit,” but none of these *must* be interpreted as referring to tongues. In fact, they all make perfectly good sense as intelligent thought-out prayer, empowered by and conducted in the Spirit.

Private use of tongues goes against the four purposes outlined in scriptures, as noted above. Private tongues constitutes using for one's self a gift that was intended for the benefit of others. Such goes against the context and principle of I Corinthians chapter 13 (the Love chapter) and chapter 14. The Apostle Peter in his first epistle “*As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*” (4:10)

### ***What about the purported benefits of praying in tongues?***

The contention that tongues gives a release of spirit to pray more freely, confuses what spirituality is all about. This is tantamount to saying that tongues are more “spiritual” and express spiritual thoughts unhindered by the flesh or mind. Yet, the scriptures nowhere say this. “Flesh” in Scriptures does not necessarily mean that the mind is of no value in the spiritual arena. In fact, God calls on us to engage our minds in the greatest of spiritual activity: “*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole ... mind.*” It is the untransformed mind that is out of

step with God (Romans 12:2). Paul in I Corinthians 14:14ff indicates that prayer should be done with the spirit *and* the mind.

George Mallone in his book, Those Controversial Gifts, lists eight benefits or aspects concerning tongues. For example, there is the sense of God's presence, it cleanses the mind, helps us bear up under physical pain, etc. However, these blessings are all available by faith and are nowhere tied to tongues exclusively! We should simply take God at His Word and accept His promises in faith. To seek benefits from tongues through private use is taking our faith out of the arena of God's promises and placing it onto the slippery slope of pseudo-supernaturalism. We are to walk by faith, not by sight or experience (see Hebrews 11).

Some might object and say there is benefit to God in hearing us unrestrained by the fleshly mind. But, in what way would any specific kind of prayer language benefit God? Whether "olde English" or scrambled syllables are used, God reads the intents of our hearts, minds and spirits. Stress should therefore not be on the form of our language but on purity of communication.

## CAUTIONS

### *How Does One Evaluate Tongues Today?*

Can it be faked? Yes, it can be. Though ungodly judging is wrong, godly judgment and evaluation is entirely in keeping with Scripture (*Test everything. Hold on to the good.* I Thessalonians 5:21). Someone may say such judging is evidence for lack of faith. But, this objection builds, on the one hand, a case for gullibility akin to the story of the emperor who wore a new set of clothes that only those loyal to him could see. On the other hand, an "unknown" tongue creates an "undeniable" situation—it is neither provable nor unprovable. Something that cannot be tested or verified is subject to all kinds of misuse or fakery. However, a known language cannot be faked. Whatever is of God will be exonerated by godly judgment.

One can always claim "I know it is true because I experience it" or "How can it be wrong when I get so much benefit from it and it brings me closer to God?" But as mentioned before, experience, if not understood correctly, proves very little.

We must ask questions like:

- Does it conflict with Biblically prescribed purposes and usage?
- Does the person exhibit the fruit of the Spirit? (Gal 5:22)
- Does the specific experience reflect a known human language? Can it be verified? Interpreted?
- Is it psychologically induced?
- Is the person emotionally stable in other areas?

## ***Are Tongues a Sign of spirituality?***

No! The sign of spirituality in Scripture is found in Galatians 5:22—the fruit of the Spirit (i.e. love, joy, peace, etc.). The tongues speakers of Corinth were anything but spiritual!

## ***Doesn't the scripture say we shouldn't forbid speaking in tongues***

The scriptural injunction not to forbid speaking in tongues (I Corinthians 14:39) should be understood in context. No one should forbid true tongues when exercised in the Biblical manner with Biblical purpose and genuinely inspired by the Spirit of God. Glossolalia that does not line up with Biblical teaching should and must be forbidden.

## ***Possible Sources of Tongues***

There are three possible sources of glossolalia. First, this experience could be self-induced. The power of peer-pressure from other Christians can indeed be strong. Psychological factors play a role. A person's own strong desire for spiritual experiences can bring about a false experience that seems very spiritual. Aided by false teaching about the gift of tongues, many are confused in their genuine search for truth.

A second possible source of glossolalia is demonic influence. Our historical study demonstrates this as displayed in the many pagan cults that practiced glossolalia. For Satan transforms himself into an angel of light and thus can deceive us people with false teaching and false experiences (II Corinthians 11:14). The scripture is clear that we should test all things (I Thessalonians 5:21, I Corinthians 14:29, I John 4:1-3).

Finally, glossolalia can be sourced in God. In this case it would be a known human language supernaturally endowed by God for His purposes and according to the scriptural pattern.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

We live in a stage of Christendom where many churches minimize or negate the supernatural. The man or woman who longs after God, His supernatural power and His presence, seeks Him! Many in their quest for spiritual reality and vitality seek the supernatural to bring a sense closeness to the Savior. But in doing so a pseudo-supernatural is often found instead. These experiences may well be “extraordinary” and seem “real” but often they are not verifiable, bona-fide miracles of the supernatural.

The gift of tongues was the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in causing a person to speak in a known language he had never known before.

Does this line of reasoning limit God? No! For God to enable men to speak supernaturally in a verifiable way with a known human language is not a difficult thing at all for Him. Where is our faith? If there is a limitation created by such an interpretation, it is the limitation on the forgery of man!

If we desire the supernatural, let us desire that which is truly supernatural and verifiable. Are we “doubting Thomases”? No, we are simply “testing all things.” Does this mean we should “grill” every person who desires to exercise a spiritual gift? No. But, in a day when the so-called “miraculous” gifts are being so emphasized, we would do well to be cautious about that which can so easily deceive us and be misused.

Historically, glossolalia is not unique to Christendom. But, Biblical tongues are known human languages given by the Spirit of God for the purposes of communication, judgment, edification of the Church and authentication. They are to be regulated in the Church, and not for private use. It should be tested and verified. All that is false and unscriptural should be rejected.

This writer's conviction is that it would be very difficult to use tongues today with the given Scriptural purposes. Certainly, God can do and does do as He desires, but He has shown us in His word what He desires. Much, if not most, of the present day glossolalia does not line up with Biblical teaching. Experience, no matter how good and right it seems, does not determine the Biblicalness of that experience. God's Word alone is our guide.

Let us all be like the Bereans who “... *were more noble-minded ... for they received the Word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so*” (Acts 17:11).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, Colin. Ed. The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Zondervan Publishers, 1978. (s.v. "Word", III:1089).
- Burns, Lanier. "Pneumatology" (class notes), Dallas Theological Seminary, Theology 404, 1982.
- Dillow, Joseph. Speaking in Tongues: Seven Crucial Questions. Zondervan Publishers, 1975.
- Eusebius. Ecclesiastical History. Baker Book House, 1955.
- Findlay, G.G. St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979 (reprinted).
- Gromacki, Robert Glenn. The Modern Tongues Movement. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1972.
- Hannah, John. History of Pentecostalism. (class notes) Dallas Theological Seminary, 1983.
- Hodge, Charles. First Epistle to the Corinthians. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980 (reprinted).
- Long, David B. What the Bible Teaches About the Gift of Tongues. Everyday Publications, 1972.
- MacArthur, John Jr. The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective. Zondervan Publishing House, 1978.
- Mallone, George. Those Controversial Gifts. Inter-Varsity Press, 1983.
- McRae, William. The Dynamics of Spiritual Gifts. Zondervan Publishing House, 1976.
- Morris, Leon. The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958 (Tyndale Commentary Series)
- Stott, John R. W. Baptism and Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today. Inter-Varsity Press, 1977.
- van Gorder, Paul R. The Church Stands Corrected, Victor Books (Division of Scripture Press), 1962.

## **APPENDIX I: List of acronyms and abbreviations**

ca.	“circa” (means “approximately”) used to indicate an approximate date
cf.	“see further the following reference”
cp.	“compare with the following reference”
CRG	Indicates that the following notation is the this writer's note inserted into a quote
e.g.	“for example”
f	Used after a verse reference to mean “read also the verse right after the one listed”
ff	Used after a verse reference to mean “read also the next few verses after the one listed”
i.e.	“that is”
Illus.	“The following is an illustration”
sic.	Used in a quotation where this writer recognizes an apparent error or discrepancy is the quoted author’s actual writing.

