

WHAT IS SPEAKING IN TONGUES? THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF SPEAKING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

The issue of speaking in tongues is confusing and engulfing the church. The tongue-speaking movement has become a dominant influence worldwide. It is important for the believer to know what the Bible says on this controversial issue in order to refute this practice and its false teaching. If there is anything good, the devil will distort it, counterfeit it, and corrupt it. That is what he has done with the tongues issue.

It is helpful to discuss briefly the recent history of this issue in order to better understand the situation that confronts us today. In the book *The Nineteen Gifts of the Spirit*, the author L. B. Flynn provided the following background information:

Speaking in tongues began in 1906. California was the location of the origin of modern-day tongues-speaking movement. For the first half of the 1900s, it was generally restricted to a few small denominations. The acceptance of the Pentecostal experience by some churches of the main line denominations began in 1960. The utterance of ecstatic sounds, at one time was confined to the lower economic classes. The tongues speakers were looked upon as a radical group of folk that seem to be a bit uneducated and highly emotional. Around 1967 the movement took off in Roman Catholic circles. Religious bookstores which a few years ago refused to carry Pentecostal writings now find them top sellers. Speaking in tongues has become an 'in' practice among many Christians.¹

When the Bible uses the phrase *speaking in tongues*, what does it mean? The Greek word for tongue is *glossa*, and from it we get our English word "glossary." In the Bible, this same word is translated as either *tongue* or *language*. What does the Bible mean by language, and how is it defined? Does language refer to human tongues such as Spanish, French, English, or Chinese? Or does the Bible teach of an unknown heavenly language? This question is at the heart of this debate. When this aspect of the issue is

¹Leslie Flynn, *Nineteen Gifts of the Spirit* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1974), 179.

settled, it clarifies many of the other issues surrounding speaking in tongues. Believers must study all issues in light of the Word of God and base their doctrine on the eternal and unchanging truths found therein.

The Book of Acts explains and demonstrates how tongues were used in the early church. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit after He ascended into glory. The Book of Acts records the first account of tongues in the events of that great day when the Holy Spirit came upon the church: “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). This was the beginning of the church and the Holy Spirit empowered believers to speak in other tongues.

The very next verse gives us the context of the situation in Jerusalem: “And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). It was the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1), and there were Jews in Israel from every country. There was great excitement amongst the Jewish pilgrims in hearing someone speak in their native language: “Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because every man heard them speak in his own language” (Acts 2:6). Languages from all over the world were being spoken in Jerusalem. They were known tongues: foreign languages to the apostles, but known languages to the pilgrims from around the vast Roman Empire.

Those that heard in their own language were amazed because the men that spoke were Galileans: “And they were all amazed and marveled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these who speak Galileans?” (Acts 2:7). This was specifically referring to the Galileans lack of education and unlearned background (Acts 4:13). Individuals from

every corner of the Roman Empire were hearing the Galileans speak in their native dialect. Acts 2:8 records for us: “And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?” It is clear from Acts 2 that the *other tongues* were human languages that other people could understand. The believers were gifted by God with a special ability to speak foreign languages which they had not learned. The specific foreign languages that were spoken are recorded in Acts 2:9-11. The Bible is very clear regarding what happened that day. Foreigners heard the gospel message in their own language. This identifies the true nature and purpose of biblical tongues.

The Old Testament aids our understanding of the word *tongues*. An invasion was predicted in Deut. 28:49 from a “nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand.” When the Jews would hear a language they did not know, it would be the language of the invading Assyrians. They were to be taken over by a human people who spoke a human language they did not know. The Assyrian language was a known language that could be translated. The Bible teaches unmistakably that tongues were defined as human languages. This is another passage demonstrating the true nature of tongues.

After the Book of Acts, only one book of the New Testament mentions tongues, and that book mentions it as a problem. Most of the controversy regarding tongues comes from the Book of 1 Corinthians. This book was written to correct many misunderstandings that had arisen in the worldly congregation at Corinth. From early on in chapter 1, the Apostle Paul had been correcting and rebuking the church. The Book of 1 Corinthians was not written to compliment this church because many of the things they were thinking and doing did not reflect Biblical Christianity, especially in their use of

tongues. For future churches to base their Christian practices on what the Corinthians were doing is not wise.

It is important for the believer to understand the distortions concerning the tongues issue. Many false teachings abound regarding the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. Enumerating several false teachings about tongues helps to clarify the tongues issue. Some teach that tongues are a special spiritual language outside of any known language; it is called a heavenly language or the language of angels. One list of spiritual gifts is found in 1 Cor. 12:8-10 which includes the *various kinds of tongues* (1 Cor. 12:10). It is important to note the plural ending of *tongues* (1 Cor. 12:30). This plurality would indicate many languages, not one special heavenly language. This does not refer to a heavenly language, but to many foreign languages.

Another question that is often asked is, "What does 'the tongues of men and of angels' mean in 1 Cor. 13:1?" The bogus argument is that there are two kinds of tongues: human and angelic. In order to refute this false claim, we need to make two observations from the Scriptures. First, whenever angels spoke in the Bible, they spoke in human language. Even if we were to entertain an angel, his language would not give him away. There is no reference in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation of a heavenly angelic dialect. Whenever angels spoke, they communicated in the language of the people. Second, 1 Cor. 13:3 uses hyperbole to teach about love. This passage uses hypothetical situations to make a strong point about the importance of *agape* love in a believer's life, not an angelic language.

Another false teaching is that every believer needs to possess the gift of tongues. They say if an individual does not speak in tongues, he is not a believer, or he is not

spiritual. The Bible refutes these teachings as well. Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit determines what spiritual gift each individual receives: “But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will” (1 Cor. 12:11). There is not a cafeteria line where individuals can pick and choose their spiritual gift. What is received is totally determined by God. Spiritual gifts are not earned nor learned; they are given by the grace of God. This verse demonstrates that not all of the Corinthian believers possessed the gift of tongues. There are no other spiritual gifts that every believer must possess; why would tongues be any different?

Spiritual gifts are not only supernaturally given, but they are diversified. All believers do not receive the same spiritual gift. The Bible teaches a variety and diversity of spiritual gifts: “Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:4). Even in the early church, not everyone possessed the ability to speak in tongues. Notice that the Apostle Paul asked a series of rhetorical questions. Each question has the obvious answer of no: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Cor. 12:29-30). Anyone who says that everyone should speak in tongues is teaching contrary to the Word of God.

Another false teaching is that speaking in tongues is the sign of the “Second Blessing.” This teaches that a believer does not receive all of the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation, but at a latter time when the individual is able to speak in tongues. This belief is heresy according to the teachings of Scripture. All Christians, even carnal Christians, according to 1 Cor. 3:1-3, have the Holy Spirit: “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His” (Rom. 8:9). If you do not have the Spirit of Christ, you

do not belong to Him: “What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost who is in you, whom ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (1 Cor. 6:19).

The Corinthian church was one of the most ungodly churches of the entire New Testament, yet they were saints because they were saved, and the Spirit of God dwelt in them (1 Cor. 1:2).

The apostle Paul points out that all believers have been baptized in the Spirit: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13).

When a person receives Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells each believer. We do not need to pray or speak in tongues for the Holy Spirit to come. God says those who have received Christ have the Holy Spirit: “In whom ye also trusted, after ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also after ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, Who is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:13-14). The word *earnest* is a business term signifying a down payment on something that will be fully realized later.

Believers are not commanded in the Scriptures to seek to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. At the moment of salvation, every believer is baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ. If a person has not been baptized by the Spirit, he is not in the body of Christ; there is no other way of entering Christ’s body. The baptism of the Holy Spirit takes place once, but the filling of the Spirit is a repeated action: “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). This verse has produced many additional errors in the tongues movement. The word *filled* in this context refers to the control of the Holy Spirit. It is not referring to an experience where an

individual receives more of the Spirit of God. This verse is implying the yielding of a believer to the Spirit's control.

What were the biblical parameters for the use of tongues in the early church? Spiritual gifts were to be used by believers to profit the church: "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit" (1 Cor. 12:7). Spiritual gifts are not for personal enjoyment but for God's employment. The Bible teaches that if a person spoke in tongues and no one could understand it, it did not profit the church and it was of no value (1 Cor. 14:2-10). Anything that produces chaos in the church is not of God. It must be orderly to be of the Spirit. Two statements in 1 Cor. 14 teach this: "Let all things be done unto edifying" (v. 26), and, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (v. 40).

There was a major problem with order in the Corinthian church. It is interesting to note that the tongues speakers were the ones causing trouble (vs. 26 and 27); therefore, the apostle Paul gave several instructions for the church to obey in their public meetings: "Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the others judge" (1 Cor. 14:29). Why were the messages judged? They were evaluated to determine whether the speaker had truly communicated the Word of God. It was and is possible for a speaker, under the control of his own emotions, to imagine that God was speaking to him and through him. The listeners should test the message, then, by Old Testament Scriptures, and now, by the whole counsel of the Word of God.

The apostle Paul also wrote, "If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret" (1 Cor. 14:27). If the Corinthians were going to include tongue speaking in their church service, only two people should speak, or on exceptions maybe three. When we see entire churches singing

in tongues, praying in tongues, or speaking in tongues, they are in fact disobeying God's Word (1 Cor. 14:27). According to this verse, those that spoke in tongues were to take turns, so that God's church was run decently and in order. The issue was to edify the church, not confuse it.

Believers need to understand the biblical priority of the local church. The local church is not experience oriented—casting out demons, revelations, speaking in tongues, and healing. It is easy for any church to lose their spiritual compass. Whole denominations and churches are built upon the false teaching of the *tongues* movement. According to the Bible, the proclamation of the Word of God is more important than the spiritual gift of tongues: “For greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues” (1 Cor. 14:5). “Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:1). Prophecy is the proclamation of God's Word. God's church should desire the clear ministry of the revelation of God which is God's mind and will revealed through His Word. 1 Cor. 14:1 does not say pursue tongues. The apostle Paul says pursue the clear understanding of the Word of God. The emphasis of the Christian life and the local church is the declaration of the truth of God. That is our priority. Verse 3 states: “But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3). Why does this gift exist? For the same reason all of the spiritual gifts exist, for the edification of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:5). The word *edification* means to build up: “Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Cor. 14:26). Tongues are not for our own benefit. We are to minister our gift, and our gifts are to profit everyone: “As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10). Whenever the gift of tongues is

elevated and emphasized in a church service, it is out of place and out of priority. The issue is the clear communication of the Word of God.

1 Cor. 14:7-9 speaks to the understanding of the congregation regarding what is spoken in the church service: “And even things without life, giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air.” God’s teaching is that the words used in church services must be understood by those in the service. “Therefore, if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me” (1 Cor. 14:11).

Consider this simple example: suppose an individual went to church one night and the pastor preached entirely in Spanish. For most English speaking individuals, the service would be meaningless. That is what Paul was saying in 1 Cor. 14. Unless something has meaning, it is of no benefit: “Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, then ten thousand words in an unknown tongue” (1 Cor. 14:19). It would be better to hear a five-word sermon in English than a 10,000-word sermon in Spanish. It is God’s desire that the church service be profitable and edifying. God warned the local church against alienating the unbeliever with chaotic church services: “If, therefore, the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad?” (1 Cor. 14:23). Churches

that improperly used the spiritual gift of tongues were a stumbling block to the unbelievers.

The gift of speaking in tongues in the early church was a way of communicating with a foreigner, and it was also used as a demonstration of God's power to the unbeliever: "Wherefore, tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not; but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them who believe" (1 Cor. 14:22). According to 1 Cor. 14:18, the apostle Paul said, "I speak with tongues more than ye all." He had to routinely speak on the various mission fields, as he traveled from place to place. No matter where Paul went preaching the gospel, God supernaturally endowed Paul to speak in the language of the foreigner.

The apostle Paul did not write 1 Cor. 14 to condemn tongues but to correct it and control it. Speaking in tongues was a spiritual gift. Whenever the Bible speaks of tongues, it was speaking about an intelligent language, not gibberish. The Bible makes this very clear: "In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:21).

When we say someone spoke in tongues in the Bible, we are referring to a human language. The miracle in Acts 2 was that men were able to speak in a foreign language that they had never learned. The New Testament is clear and consistent in teaching that the gift of tongues was the enabling of believers by the Holy Spirit to speak in earthly languages they did not previously know. In Mark 16:17, tongues is listed among the sign gifts of the transition time of the establishment of the church which ceased after the church was established and the New Testament was completed (1 Cor. 13:8-10). An

examination of the passages where it is described proves this to be true. According to the Word of God, tongues refer to a human language spoken by a person who was not educated nor trained to speak it. The entire tongues movement is based on unbiblical practices and false interpretations of the Word of God. The present phenomena of tongues speaking does not measure up to biblical doctrine.