

A Closer Look at Speaking in TONGUES

■ A major segment of Christianity believes that speaking in tongues and other “spiritual gifts” are necessary to validate the gift of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. What can we learn from a closer look at the scriptures on this subject?

by **Larry J. Walker**

Speaking in tongues was one of the spiritual gifts that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit, marking the beginning of the New Testament Church on the Day of Pentecost after Christ’s death and resurrection.

Surprisingly, the gift of tongues is mentioned in only seven chapters in the New Testament. Examining these passages will help us understand the Bible teaching on the subject and its relevance for God’s Church today.

Mark 16:17

Mark 16:17 appears to support the teaching that speaking in tongues is necessary by including “they will speak with new tongues” with several “signs” that “will follow those who believe.”

Does this passage mean that everyone who is baptized will always experience all of these spiritual gifts? If so, it would mean that any believer should be able to lay hands on the sick and cast out demons. There are no New Testament examples of anointing and laying on of hands for healing by anyone other than Jesus Christ, the apostles and elders of the Church.

Although anyone can use the name of Christ to rebuke evil spirits, casting out demons in others is also primarily a ministerial function.

The seven sons of Sceva had to learn this lesson the hard way (Acts 19:12-16).

It is important to note that Jesus made this statement in the context of the great commission to preach the gospel. Even on their training tour, the disciples were given the power to anoint and heal the sick and to cast out demons (Mark 6:7-13).

In Luke’s account of the disciples’ amazement over the results of their ministry (Luke 10:17-20), Jesus had promised them “authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy” and said, “Nothing shall by any means hurt you.” The apostle Paul was able to shake off with no harm a poisonous snake that had bitten him during his ministry on the island of Malta (Acts 28:3-6).

Mark 16:17 relates primarily to promises for the apostles and elders in the line of duty. But even for them, the promises were not automatic, universal and for all time. The gift of healing is subject to God’s will (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). For example, the apostle Paul had a gift of healing (Acts 19:11), yet later in his ministry we read that Paul left fellow laborer Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). One assumes that Paul anointed Trophimus and prayed for him, but he was not healed. Paul was also stricken with some malady and besought the Lord three times, but he was not healed (2 Corinthians 12:5-8).

So Mark 16:17 does not prove that speaking in tongues is necessary to validate the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:1-21

When the Holy Spirit was first given, all present were “filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (verse 4). Verses 7-11

clearly explain that these “tongues” (*glossa* in Greek) refer to known languages. Verse 8 also relates a lesser-mentioned fact—that everyone heard them speak in their own dialect (Greek *dialektos*).

This passage clarifies the meaning of “new tongues” in Mark 16:17. These languages were not new in the sense of being unknown. Rather, they were new to those who spoke them because they had never spoken these languages before. The range of meanings of *kainos* (translated “new” in Mark 16:17) includes “unused” and pertaining “to being not previously present” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition (BDAG), by Frederick William Danker, et. al., from BibleWorks software, 2000).

Their ability to speak the language of another nation had nothing to do with human training or learning but was a miracle from God. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:4, NRSV).

Peter quoted the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 to explain this phenomenon as an initial fulfillment of the dramatic signs and wonders that would take place “before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD” (Acts 2:14-21).

In addition to the impact of the miraculous aspect of this event was the practical benefit that everyone present was able to understand each other without interpretation. Some have pointed out that this was the opposite of what took place at the Tower of Babel.

Acts 10:44-48

The historical context of this passage is the beginning of salvation being made available

to gentiles. Luke mentions briefly that Jewish members were impressed by the fact that the gentiles spoke in tongues, and as a result recommended that they be baptized. The miracle of tongues was thus a “sign” of God’s presence and power that proved to them that God had given the gentile believers the Holy Spirit as He had previously done for Jewish believers on Pentecost.

Acts 19:1-7

This passage describes the baptism of 12 men in Ephesus who “spoke with tongues and prophesied” after “the Holy Spirit came upon them” (verses 5-6). These men had not even heard of the Holy Spirit prior to meeting Paul. So when they were baptized, God chose to confirm the existence and presence of the Holy Spirit by means of the gift of tongues and prophecy. This event marked the beginning of the congregation in Ephesus, one of the major congregations in the early Church.

Historical summary

So far, we have seen that Jesus promised spiritual gifts to His disciples to help them fulfill their preaching ministry. All three passages in Acts chronicle milestone events in the foundational history of the New Testament Church. In all three cases, it is important to factor in the Jewish mind-set that Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 1:22, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom” (NIV). Or as the NLT puts it, “The Jews . . . want a sign from heaven to prove it is true.” So God chose to confirm His presence in these key events by means of the miracle of speaking in tongues, as promised by Jesus in Mark 16:17.

Unlike the other promises Jesus offered the disciples in Mark 16:17, the passages in Acts show that speaking in tongues and the gift of prophecy were practiced by new believers, not just by the apostles and elders. However, the accounts indicate only that this was done immediately after receiving the Holy Spirit. There is no indication that these new converts continued to speak in tongues and prophesy on other occasions to prove that they had the Holy Spirit.

Tongues in Corinth

This brings us to the situation in Corinth. Far more information on the subject of “tongues” appears in 1 Corinthians than all of the previous passages combined. Many consider 1 Corinthians 14, which has often been called “the tongues chapter,” as the most definitive

source of information on the subject.

However, the foundational passage for determining the method and meaning of speaking in tongues should be Acts 2 for several reasons:

- Pentecost was the first occurrence of this gift.
- The text clearly states that the miracle was from God.
- The text clearly explains that the gift of tongues (*glossa*) refers to a supernatural ability to speak in known languages.

What about Corinth? Have you ever wondered why the Corinthians, with all of their carnality and related problems, would be given the gift of tongues?

We need to read very carefully what Paul wrote to the Corinthians in order to assess their situation properly.

Background and context of 1 Corinthians 14

Paul wrote this letter to the Church of God at Corinth to deal with serious problems, including congregational rifts, intellectual vanity and overemphasis on knowledge, serious misconduct relating to Passover observance, involvement and participation in pagan ceremonies, doctrinal heresies and disorder in church services. He also wrote to reply to these and other questions posed to him by members of the congregation (7:1).

Paul begins dealing with this problem by explaining basic points about spiritual gifts (12:1-30) on the heels of a lengthy discussion of idolatry. The contextual connection of these two topics suggests that the pagan, idolatrous past of many in the congregation had a direct bearing on their errors of belief and practice regarding spiritual gifts, as well as affecting many of their other problems.

In chapter 12 Paul seeks to set the record straight about spiritual gifts in response to questions that they had asked in their letter to him. In verse 1 he begins the specific topic of spiritual gifts by expressing a desire for the Corinthians to not be “ignorant” (“uninformed”—NRSV) on the subject of spiritual gifts. The implication is that they were uninformed about this at the time of writing.

In verse 2 he refers to their pagan background, which involved counterfeits of true spiritual gifts. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* by Gerhard Kittel (Vol. 1, p. 722) documents a number of extrabiblical references in which *glossa* refers to ecstatic utterances in pagan cults, documenting that this was a common religious practice in New

Testament times as well as throughout Greek history.

The BDAG lexicon offers as one definition of *glossa*, “an utterance outside the normal patterns of intelligible speech and therefore requiring special interpretation, *ecstatic language, ecstatic speech, tongue*,” and concludes, “There is no doubt about the thing referred to, namely the strange speech of persons in religious ecstasy . . . as found in Hellenistic religion” (BDAG lexicon from BibleWorks software).

Putting these two verses together suggests that the Corinthian congregation’s lack of understanding regarding spiritual gifts combined with the influence of their pagan past resulted in problems that Paul addresses specifically in chapter 14. So Paul had to explain how God works in regard to spiritual gifts to correct the errors in their understanding and practice resulting from their pagan past.

It would be a mistake to think of the worship service in Corinth as being similar to an orderly, structured service with preassigned sermonette and sermon. Rather, it was a disorganized, disruptive, disorderly scene with members clamoring to be heard with either a “teaching” (*didache*), a “tongue,” a “revelation” or an interpretation (14:26). These unregulated, spontaneous displays resulted in chaos and confusion in their worship services (14:33, 40). The fact that Paul concludes the chapter with the admonition, “Let all things be done decently and in order” tells us that decency and order were not present in their services.

The Corinthians were apparently making a false show of spirituality with their spiritual gifts. Their display of false spirituality was causing division in the Church. John MacArthur offers an excellent assessment of the charismatic chaos in Corinth, “The desire to ‘look spiritual’ was why the gift of languages was exploited and perverted to such a great degree” (*The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective*, p. 108).

So Paul instructs them on the purpose of spiritual gifts. He shows them that one member of the Body of Christ is not superior to another member of the Body of Christ just because he has a gift that another person doesn’t possess. In fact, the purpose of spiritual gifts is to edify the whole Body of Christ.

While some were flaunting what they claimed to be their spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues, others were not being edified (14:2-19). Paul puts this topic in proper perspective by emphasizing that dramatic

displays of faith are worthless if not based on love (12:31-13:13), which forms the springboard of his admonitions for restoring decency and order to their worship service (14:1a). Love must be the motivating force behind the proper use of spiritual gifts, and edification of the Church is the intended result (14:1-19).

How, he asks, can anyone be edified by someone speaking in a tongue (language) that he or she doesn't understand? He encourages them to desire rather to "prophesy" ("to proclaim an inspired revelation"—BDAG lexicon, from BibleWorks software).

Paul explains that the gift of tongues is to be a "sign" to unbelievers, not to fellow Church members (14:22). He emphasizes the priority of "prophesying" within the congregation, because this results in edification of the body, whereas speaking in a different language (especially without interpretation) is, at best, edifying only to the speaker (14:1-5).

Although speaking in tongues is to be a "sign" to unbelievers, if a nonmember happened to walk into their service, he would think they were "out of their minds" if everyone were speaking in tongues (14:23). On the other hand, if everyone were prophesying, the combined effect could result in the person worshipping God, with the conviction that God was working through them (14:24-25).

But regardless of what spiritual gift one may desire to express, it must be done in an orderly fashion in order to achieve positive results (14:26-33). He concludes this instruction by stating that "God is not the author of confusion" (14:33), implying that God is neither pleased with, nor the source of, the disorderly condition of their alleged spiritual conduct.

After making these fundamental points, Paul gives specific instructions for correcting the problems that have resulted in chaos (14:26-40).

If anyone speaks in a tongue, there must be someone to interpret, for the sake of being understood by the rest of the congregation (14:6-17). Paul emphasizes this priority by stating that he would rather utter only five words that result in the audience understanding than ten thousand words in a language that the audience would not understand (14:19). He emphasizes the motivation of love for exercising spiritual gifts in a manner that

would result in edification of the congregation.

Instead of several people talking at the same time, he instructs them to take turns speaking and enjoins respectful silence upon the rest of the congregation so that they might learn and be edified (14:27-31).

In addition to this practical information, Paul subtly and inductively explains how true spiritual gifts are manifested in the hopes that some would realize that these characteristics do not match what was taking place in their congregation.

In verse 32 he writes, "The spirits of prophets are subject to [the control of] the prophets," hoping that some will recognize that members exercising what they claimed as their spiritual gifts were out of control.

In verse 33 he writes, "God is not the author of confusion," leading to the obvious conclusion that God is not the source of this chaos and pandemonium. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* notes, "The word *akatastasia* is a strong one, indicating great disturbance, disorder, or even insurrection or revolution (Luke 21:9). Paul is afraid of unregulated worship that might lead to disorderly conduct and belie the God of peace who has called them to be orderly" (Vol. 10, p. 276).

When we understand the chaotic, disorderly state of affairs that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 14, it is apparent that this chapter does not present a model for understanding speaking in tongues or exercising spiritual gifts, but rather how not to.

Influence of Corinthians' pagan past

Is it possible that at least some of the Corinthians' charismatic practices were satanic, pagan counterfeits? Consider Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 12:3, "Therefore [in view of their ignorance and pagan past] I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (NRSV).

Why would Paul make such a statement? Apparently because some, claiming to be prophesying, did say "Let Jesus be cursed." This statement reflects a Gnostic belief that rejects the humanity of Jesus and is certainly not of God, as Paul plainly states. He does not tell us who and how many made these

statements. These could have been heretical impostors infiltrating the services seeking to undermine the work of God and/or members of the congregation influenced and inspired by the wrong spirit to utter this blasphemous statement.

Another point to consider is that the "tongues" miracle on Pentecost resulted in people understanding what was said without interpretation as they heard in their own dialect what was being spoken (Acts 2:8). The "tongues" spoken in Corinth did not. So no one was edified because they did not understand what was being said (1 Corinthians 14:6-19).

Based on what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, it is obvious that members of the congregation were uninformed on the subject of spiritual gifts. This and the influence of their pagan past resulted in the chaotic, disorderly displays that Paul sought to set straight. So the Corinthians do not provide a model for the proper practice of speaking in tongues.

Conclusions

Speaking in tongues is a supernatural gift that God has given at times during the history of the Church to further the growth and development of His work. It is neither a guarantee nor a proof of conversion. It was certainly never intended to be used to try to show spiritual superiority as in the manner of conduct that Paul encountered at Corinth. Nor was it meant to be practiced at all times by all believers as a proof of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The true spiritual gift of speaking in tongues had a strategic purpose in the plan of God in the early history of the Church. As Peter tells us in Acts 2, the Bible prophesies a great time of genuine charismatic revival, accompanied by heavenly signs "before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD" (Acts 2:14-21; Joel 2:28-32).

However dramatic, speaking in tongues is only a temporary phenomenon with limited value. As Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 13:8 (NRSV), "But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end." As he advised the Corinthians, "Earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31). That way is love, because "love never ends" (1 Corinthians 13:8, NRSV).