

Speaking in Tongues

By Pastor David C. Forsyth

What Are “Tongues”?

There is probably no greater defining phenomenon for the modern Charismatic Movement than the practice of “speaking in tongues.” This practice of making unintelligible sounds with the mouth is called *glossolalia* and is not the same phenomenon as is recorded in the pages of Scripture.

The New Testament writers use the word *glossa*, which refers to either the physical organ or to a language, to describe the phenomenon which first appeared at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11). At Pentecost, the disciples were “speaking of the mighty deeds of God,” in languages that their listeners could readily understand, but which the speakers had no previous knowledge of. Later in Acts 10, when the Gentiles first received the message of salvation they also spoke in tongues which were understandable to Peter and his companions (Acts 10:46, 11:15), thus establishing that these tongues were also true human languages. Finally, in Acts 19, when Paul had witnessed to the disciples of John, and they had believed in Jesus, they also spoke in tongues and prophesied (v. 6). We would understand this occurrence of tongues to also be true human language since Luke uses the same Greek word as he does in Acts 2:6 to describe it, and Paul evidently understood that they were prophesying, which also implies a discernable language.

In Mark 16:17 Jesus commissions His recalcitrant disciples to go out and spread the Gospel, which He says will be accompanied by various signs. In verse 20, Mark, speaking in a past tense, says that they obeyed Jesus and spread the Gospel, which Jesus confirmed by the promised signs. Thus we would conclude that this reference in Mark refers to a past tense historical reality confined to the disciples, and is not an ongoing promise to the Church.

The last mention of the use of tongues is in Paul's first letter to the divisive and spiritually immature church at Corinth. In chapters 12-14 of that letter, Paul instructs them on the proper use of the spiritual gift of tongues.

What Is Their Purpose?

Based upon a careful reading of chapters 12-14, it appears that the gift of tongues or languages had two basic purposes. First, like all spiritual gifts it was designed to build up or bring together the church (I Cor. 12:7). This important function can not be minimized without arriving at a defective theology of spiritual gifts (See article entitled "[Understanding Spiritual Gifts](#)"). Secondly, tongues' speaking was for the purpose of giving new revelation, or as a sign to the Jews that God was working out His new program in accordance with Old Testament prophecy.

The ability of tongues speakers to give new revelation in the form of prophecy was limited by the ability of the foreign language to be interpreted by either the speaker or another qualified individual (I Cor. 14:5). It is in this context that Paul tells the Corinthian tongues speakers that if they fail to provide an interpretation, then in effect they are speaking only to God, since He will be the only one who will understand what is being said (I Cor. 14:2). Also, if the speaker fails to provide an interpretation (I Cor. 14:4) then he is the only one receiving the benefit of the revelation, which may edify him, but is contrary to the stated purpose of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12:7). Thus Paul labors the point in chapter 14 that prophecy is superior to tongues because it does not require interpretation and thus immediately edifies the church.

The understanding of tongues as a sign to Israel is very clearly stated in I Corinthians 21-22. *"In the Law it is written, 'BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,' says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers, but*

to those who believe.” Paul’s citation of the Law is a reference back to Isaiah 28:11-12, and Deuteronomy 28:49, where God predicted that the nation of Israel would be swept away, for their refusal to heed the message of the prophets, by a Gentile nation whose speech they would not understand. This prophecy was partially fulfilled in the Assyrian captivity (II Kings 17) but awaited final fulfillment with the coming of the Church age. This sign to Israel, designed to rebuke them for their unbelief, and announce to them the implementation of God’s new program of the Church (Eph. 3:4-6), we believe was the most significant purpose of tongues. Thus we believe that when tongues had served that purpose it disappeared from the life of the Church.

Observations and Conclusions

- **Tongues will cease.** Right in the middle of Paul’s discussion of the proper use of Spiritual Gifts he includes his chapter devoted to the topic of love. In 13:8 Paul writes that love never fails, but that prophecy and knowledge will be done away with and tongues will cease. He uses the Greek word “*katargeo*,” (which means to be reduced to inactivity or done away with by something) to describe what will happen to prophecy and knowledge, but he uses the word “*pauro*,” (which means to cease permanently), to describe what will happen to tongues.¹ The mechanism which brings about the cessation of these gifts is said to be “the perfect” or “mature” (I Cor. 13:10). Some Bible commentators believe this is a reference to the maturing of the Church, coupled with the completion and circulation of the Scriptures, which would make further revelation unnecessary.²
- **Tongues of Angels.** Present day “tongues” is often acknowledged as not being the Biblical gift of languages, but a private prayer language spoken in the “tongues of angels.” Scriptural proof for this position is sought after (futilely, in vain) in 1st Cor. 13:1, however, this verse does not support this view. First, the idea of a private prayer language is

¹ MacArthur, John F., *I Corinthians*, Moody: Chicago, 1984, pages 359-62.

² Thomas, Robert L., *Tongues... Will Cease*, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, Spring 1974, Vol. 17 No. 2.

contrary to Paul's teaching on Spiritual Gifts (I Cor. 12:7). Secondly, the whole point of 13:1-3 is to raise a series of hypothetical statements in order to demonstrate the superiority of love over any and all challengers.

- **A Learned Behavior.** It is our opinion that most of what passes for “tongues” in the Charismatic Movement is in reality a learned behavior brought about by intentionally bypassing the mind.³
- **Examining the Fruit.** Although the claim is frequently made that “tongues” brings about a deeper level of spiritual communion and power, it is our observation that this is not true. We do not see any evidence that Charismatic churches, or believers, are any more sanctified or spiritually strong than non-Charismatics. On the contrary, observation indicates that in many cases, those in the Charismatic movement are less-grounded in Scripture study and inclined to give more weight to emotional experience. (See article [Relationship of Experience to Revelation.](#))
- **A Better Way.** In Paul's letter to the Galatians he writes about the struggle with the flesh and how to gain victory (Gal. 5:16-24). We submit that this is the New Testament pattern for the Christian life, not one of ecstatic experience, but a rigorous, day-by-day submission to the control of the Spirit and the authority of the Scriptures.

See next page for comment from the [ChristianFallacies.com](#) editor.

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For further study we recommend the following:

1. Charismatic Chaos – John MacArthur
2. New Testament Teaching on Tongues – Merrill Unger
3. The Charismatic Phenomenon – Peter Masters
4. The Modern Tongues Movement – Robert Gromacki
5. The Final Word – O. Palmer Robertson
6. Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit – Thomas Edgar

³ MacArthur, John F., *Charismatic Chaos*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1992, page. 220.

Comment from the ChristianFallacies.com editor:

I remember decades ago in my Christian walk when I was attending a Pentecostal church and some Christians outside those (gifts) beliefs told me differently. At first I was “defensive,” thought my pastor knew more than they did and therefore had the attitude that they didn’t know what they were talking about. Later, something caused me to open my mind and heart and I searched for answers. It took awhile, but the Lord eventually showed me His answers on the subject. (“You will seek Me and find *Me* when you search for Me with all your heart.” Jer 29:13).

As fallen creatures (since Adam) we are all recipients of the “noetic effect of sin.”¹ This gives us all a problem in coming to the complete and true knowledge of the truth in all matters. This not only affects non-Christians; this is also the answer for why there are saved Pentecostals and saved non-Pentecostals, who are 180-degrees opposed on these matters – both sides claiming they have scriptural backing for their particular posture on the matter under discussion. Obviously, both sides cannot be correct. Just like belief in Covenant vs. Dispensational theology can affect our hermeneutical principles, the relationship to Israel and the Church, our political views, and a great number of other important matters, the questions you are seeking answers to (by virtue of the fact that you are reading this article) are not matters that determine saved vs. non-saved, but are important questions regarding our method and application of Scripture, our presuppositions, our prayer, worship and walk with our Lord. Accordingly, they are of great importance. Someone once said that, “If you think right, you will live right. If you think wrong, you will live wrong. If you have incorrect doctrine, you will believe wrong. It logically follows then that since you think according to how you believe, if you believe wrong, you will live wrong.” (Some food for thought.)

The subject of the “cessation of the gifts” is not comprehensively covered in just a few pages. For any reader already convinced that tongues are not for today, the (above)

article would be enough. However, for someone with the opposite opinion, the article may fall short of adequate representation of, “Why one believes what they believe”? Because of that, I want to recommend these good sources on this subject for your thoughtful and prayerful consideration.

They are:

[Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit](#), by Edgar,
[Charismatic Challenge](#), by Napier, and
Chapter three of [Demons](#), by Konya.

What the issue really boils down to is this: Is speaking in tongues in the Bible descriptive of the unique apostolic ministry, or is it prescriptive and normative for believers today? I pray the Lord will bless your sincere investigation of His Word on this controversial subject - that is one of the wedges that has divided the modern day church.

John A. Bonin, Administrator, [ChristianFallacies.com](#)

¹ The noetic affect of sin – the affect of the fall on the mind of man.