

What is the Scriptural View of Speaking in Tongues? #1

Acts 2:4-13
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We are taught in Scripture to test that which claims to be from God to see whether the claim is true or not (1 Thessalonians 5:21; Isaiah 8:20). The Spirit of God (through the Apostle John) actually commands us not to be gullible in believing whatever the spiritual revelation or gift someone says is from God (1 John 4:1). In fact, the Berean believers were highlighted as those whom we should imitate (Acts 17:11).

Dear ones, our experience as Christians or the experience of other professing Christians, the gifts of the Spirit that we or others claim to have received, and the doctrine and worship that churches teach, all these have no authoritative claim over the inspired Word of God. All these must be subjected to the only infallible rule and standard of faith and practice: Holy Scripture. This is likewise correctly affirmed by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1:10):

The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture.

I approach the subject addressed today from the position of one who once claimed to speak in tongues. Until my mid-20s, I was very much committed to using what I believed to be speaking in tongues in times of private prayer. I also knew at such times what it was to feel blessed and encouraged (at least from an experiential perspective). But what I came to realize is that my experience must always humbly and reverently bow before the supreme authority of God's Word. And when I began to compare my experience of speaking in tongues with what the Bible teaches, I saw that my experience was not at all agreeable to the teaching of God's Word—in fact, it was contrary to what God revealed in

His Word. It was very humbling to realize that I had exalted my experience over the authority of God and His Word. But it was a gracious humbling in my life for which I will always be thankful to the Lord.

Let us humbly cast ourselves upon the Lord Jesus that He would illuminate our minds by His Spirit to know and apply the Scripture to the subject before us. There is no place for pride in our hearts (at any time) as we seek to understand the mind of God—in fact, it is fruitless to do so apart from a humble heart that proclaims, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

Over the next few Lord’s Days, we will be considering the question, What is the Scriptural View of Speaking in Tongues? It is my desire in each of the following sermons to present one or more scriptural principles by which to evaluate speaking in tongues and to respond to some objections as well. The first scriptural principle is this: **The Biblical Gift of Speaking in Tongues Was a Miraculous Ability To Speak in a Foreign Language Never Learned.**

I. **Scriptural Testimony.**

A. **Acts 2:4-13.**

1. As we now come to consider the next section in Acts 2, let us remember that the Lord Jesus had promised the baptism with the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:4,5, which was realized on the Day of Pentecost as evidenced by the sound of a rushing mighty wind and by the individual flames (or tongues) of fire that rested upon the heads of the 120 that were gathered together.

a. The baptism with the Holy Spirit was that New Covenant blessing of the Spirit bestowed by Christ which unites all

believers to Christ and to all who are united to Christ into the same Invisible, Redeemed Church of Jesus Christ. This one-time spiritual baptism, that is the gracious gift of all believers (not some), was then followed up by the 120 being filled (i.e. controlled and energized) by the Holy, which is a gracious, ongoing, and repeatable blessing in the life of the believer.

b. As the 120 were all filled by the Holy Spirit, God miraculously gave to them the spiritual gift and miraculous ability to speak in other tongues (Acts 2:4).

c. The word “tongue” (*glossa*) may mean the physical organ in the mouth (James 3:5), but it also means a foreign language of the world (Revelation 5:9; 9:11). This is likewise the nature of the tongues miraculously given by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament (as we shall see).

2. It is clear from what is said in Acts 2:4-11 that these were foreign languages that were spoken by the apostles and believers gathered together.

a. First, note this was a miracle of speaking and not a miracle of hearing (“as the Spirit gave them utterance” or literally, “as the Holy Spirit gave them to be speaking” Acts 2:4).

b. Second, observe there were devout men (Jews and proselytes) from every nation under heaven (i.e. from every nation without distinction, not from every nation without exception). When the Holy Spirit gave the gift to speak in tongues, they spoke in various distinctive languages that were used by these Jews and proselytes from nations outside Judea (Acts 2:5-6). “Every man heard them speak in his own language” (*dialektos*=dialect; cp. Acts 1:19). Thus, this gift of tongues was in the dialect of men from various countries.

c. Third, consider there was utter amazement among the Jews and proselytes from all of these nations, not because they heard the apostles and believers speaking in sounds that no one understood,

but to the contrary they heard them speak in their own languages (or literally, dialects) which they did understand (Acts 2:7-8, again *dialektos* is used in verse 8).

d. Fourth and finally, the actual countries and parts of the world whose languages were miraculously spoken are listed in Acts 2:9-11.

3. There can be no doubt that this first recorded occurrence in Scripture of the miraculous gift of speaking in tongues was speaking in actual foreign languages of the world which the 120 did not previously know or understand. The first instance of speaking in tongues having been clearly defined as foreign languages of the world, we should expect that all subsequent instances would likewise be foreign languages of the world since the same word for tongue (*glossa*) is used (unless there is clear evidence to the contrary).

B. **Acts 10:44-48.**

1. This second account of speaking in tongues narrates the taking of the gospel to the Gentiles. Remember the outline of the Book of Acts given by Jesus in Acts 1:8: to the Jews (Acts 2-7), to the Samaritans (Acts 8), and to the Gentiles (Acts 10-26).

a. Peter was given a vision earlier in Acts 10 in which certain unclean foods were lowered in a sheet from heaven, and Peter was told by the Lord to kill and eat. Peter refused saying he had never eaten any unclean foods (in accordance with the Old Testament dietary laws). This happened three times—each time God declaring, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (or unclean). Not only was the Lord teaching Peter that food that was unclean under the Old Testament is no longer unclean, but more importantly, that Gentiles who were unclean and outside the covenant community in the Old Testament, are no longer unclean in the New Covenant.

b. For just as this happened for the third time, there was

a knock at the door below, and the servants of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, were seeking Peter to come to Cornelius (just as Cornelius had been told by an angel of the Lord to send for Peter).

2. Peter preached a gospel sermon to Cornelius and to those of his family and friends who gathered to hear him. Cornelius and those gathered believed the gospel and were immediately baptized with the Holy Spirit (in the very moment in which they believed). Gentile believers were then given the same spiritual baptism as Jewish believers by which they were united to Christ and to all other believers (Jew and Gentile alike). But how did the Lord make it clear to Peter and the Jews who were with him that the Gentiles were a part of the same Church of Jesus Christ? These Gentiles began to speak in tongues just like the 120 Jews did on the Day of Pentecost. This was confirmation that God was not establishing two different churches—one Jewish Church and one Gentile Church; but rather both Jew and Gentile were members of the same New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:47; Acts 11:17).

3. Peter and the Jews recognized that Christ had incorporated Gentiles into the same New Covenant Church because both Jews and Gentiles received the same gift of the Spirit and both groups spoke in tongues (languages). In other words, this second reported occurrence of tongues is related to what happened in Acts 2 (i.e. the Gentiles received the same gift of speaking in foreign languages).

C. **1 Corinthians 12-14.**

1. In this section of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul responds to questions that were raised by Christians in the Church about the use of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1). Paul not only instructs, but also corrects the errors and abuses that were maintained and practiced in the Church of Corinth.

2. One of the abuses that needed to be corrected by Paul was in relation to the proud exaltation of the gift of tongues and such an

exaltation that was not profitable to the whole Church of Corinth. There is no indication that this gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians is a different gift of tongues than in Acts 2 or Acts 10, but rather the same word (*glossa*) is used in Acts and in 1 Corinthians. Thus, we are led by the Holy Spirit to conclude it is the same gift of tongues given in each of these occasions.

a. It is not likely that Luke (the human author of Acts) was a fellow minister and traveler with the Apostle Paul in taking the gospel to various parts of the Roman Empire would use the same word (*glossa*), but mean something different by that term.

b. No doubt, the subject of the gift of tongues having been recorded by both Paul and Luke would have been discussed together and would have been understood in the same way. In other words, the gift of tongues in Acts (recorded by Luke) would not have been a different gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians (recorded by Paul).

3. The gift of tongues is listed among the gifts given by the Holy Spirit: 1 Corinthians 12:10 (listed at the bottom); 1 Corinthians 12:28 (listed at the bottom). Interestingly, Paul teaches the Church of Corinth that it was not God's will that all speak in tongues (contrary to Pentecostal preachers heard and watched today), any more than it was God's will that all have the gift of being apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, or workers of healing. Remember from the previous sermon that it is the Spirit that determines which gifts are given to members of Christ's Church (1 Corinthians 12:11).

4. When Paul corrects the misuse of tongues at Corinth, he clearly shows that it is a foreign language of the world (1 Corinthians 14:21-22). Note here that speaking in tongues is also a foreign language likened to that of the Assyrian tongue that indicated to the unbelieving nation of Israel that God's judgment was upon them, according to Isaiah 28:11). Thus, Paul in 1 Corinthians makes clear that the gift of tongues was a foreign language of the world that was never learned.

5. Then what about 1 Corinthians 13:1? What are tongues of

men and of angels?

a. Since we have already established in our brief survey that the gift of tongues in the other instances just mentioned refer to foreign languages of the world, this cannot contradict what has already been demonstrated by Luke in Acts and by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 or 14.

b. Paul begins with the English word “though”, but it would be better translated “if” (*ean*), likewise in verse 2 (2 times) and verse 3 (2 times). What Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 is setting up a series of hypothetical cases which are not actually true of him, but are hypothetically proposed in order to show the supreme value and importance of love over what the Corinthians would likely believe to be the greatest possible spiritual gifts any one could have.

(1) If (hypothetically) I might speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity... (verse 1).

(2) If (hypothetically) I might have the gift of prophecy, and might understand **all** mysteries, and **all** knowledge, and have not charity... (verse 2).

(3) If (hypothetically) I might have **all** faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity... (verse 2).

(4) If (hypothetically) I might bestow **all** my goods to feed the poor, and have not charity... (verse 3).

(5) If (hypothetically) I might give my body to be burned, and have not charity... (verse 3).

c. Thus, Paul is not saying that he spoke in the tongues of angels, he is only saying that even if he did, but did not have charity, it would be simply a loud noise that means nothing. However, if angels do have a different language that they speak than men (which we have no recorded instance of), Paul still calls it a tongue (or language that has as much meaning, that has grammatical syntax, that has nouns, verbs, and adjectives as do all languages of this world). If there is a distinct language of angels from that of man, it is not uttering the same sounds over and

over again (as was true of me when I claimed to speak in tongues). Angels no more communicate in that way than people do in this world.

II. Historical Testimony—one representative of the early Church Fathers from among many, and one representative of the Reformation Church.

A. **John Chrysostom** (c. 344–407), commenting on 1 Corinthians 14:1–20.

And as in the time of building the tower [of Babel] the one tongue was divided into many; so then the many tongues frequently met in one man, and the same person used to discourse both in the Persian, and the Roman, and the Indian, and many other tongues, the Spirit sounding within him: and the gift was called the gift of tongues because he could all at once speak divers languages (*Homilies on First Corinthians*, 35.1).

B. **John Calvin** (1509-1564), commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:10.

There was a difference between the knowledge of tongues, and the interpretation of them, for those who were endowed with the former [i.e. the gift of tongues] were, in many cases, not acquainted with the language of the nation with which they had to deal. The interpreters rendered foreign tongues into the native language. These endowments they did not at that time acquire by labor or study, but were put in possession of them by a wonderful revelation of the Spirit (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:10*).

C. **Charles Parham**, the father of the Pentecostal movement, cited in the *Topeka State Journal*, January 7, 1901.

The Lord will give us the power of speech to talk to the people of the various nations without having to study them in schools.

Sadly, these same Pentecostal missionaries that believed they had received the gift of speaking foreign languages went out to foreign countries and returned very discouraged and embarrassed when their hearers had no idea what they were saying.

III. Linguistic Testimony.

A. We have considered both Scriptural testimony and Historical testimony, but what about studies that have been conducted by professional linguists (whose job it is to study languages of this world—even languages that they may not know—in order to learn more about those languages)?

B. In 1972, William J. Samarin, a linguist from the University of Toronto, published one of the most thorough evaluations of modern speaking in tongues. He recorded a large sample of speaking in tongues both in public and in private meetings in Italy, the Netherlands, Jamaica, Canada, and the U.S. over the course of five years. He concluded after five years of research that the cases of speaking in tongues which he closely evaluated were “meaningless but phonologically structured human utterance, believed by the speaker to be a real language but bearing no systematic resemblance to any natural language, living or dead”[Samarin, William J. (1972). *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism*. New York: Macmillan. p. 2.] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossolalia>. Other linguistic studies have produced the same results.

Thus, in conclusion I offer to you the first test that the Holy Spirit gives by which to judge and evaluate what is the biblical gift of tongues: It must be the miraculous ability to speak in a foreign language that has not been studied or learned. In my own case, this was the first step in leading me to judge that I did not have the biblical gift of tongues. I truly urge in Christian love that all who may hear this sermon and who believe they have the gift of tongues would begin here to evaluate and judge their claim.

Dear ones, is your experience supreme in what you believe and practice, or is Scripture supreme in what you believe and practice? Though this

was very difficult at that time for me to conclude that I did not have the biblical gift of tongues, I have never once regretted that decision, for I learned (by God's grace) to submit my conscience to the infallible Word of God rather than to my own fallible experience.

Dear ones, our salvation from beginning to end is by God's free grace through faith, but that same gracious salvation is made evident in our hearts by our willingness to submit ourselves, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, and to follow Christ in His Word, regardless of what it may cost us before family, friends, and even fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Let the prayer of David be your prayer and mine (Psalm 25:4).

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