

# SHOULD WE SPEAK IN TONGUES?

By

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It was at a church in Kansas around 1961, on a Saturday morning. Area preachers had been invited to come for a day of fellowship and discussion of vital spiritual matters. We had been listening for two hours to a preacher that I had worked with very closely and considered one of my best friends. Of late he had been emphasizing the church's need to give more recognition to the Holy Spirit. Suddenly he interrupted his message by saying something like, "To give you an example of what I mean..." and began to speak strange syllables that sounded like no language we had ever heard. He then claimed that he had been anointed with the Holy Spirit a few nights earlier, and that afterwards he had spent the night practicing speaking in tongues until he could speak in at least 5 different "tongues," although he had no idea what languages they might be or what he might be saying.

This was my introduction to the tongues phenomenon which burst on the scene in the 60s, dividing churches and disturbing the lives of millions of people. Because some of those involved were esteemed colleagues of mine, I took special interest, attending many of their meetings, witnessed many of their activities (but saw no miracles), and studied anew the New Testament in regard to the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues.

Repeatedly I am asked, "What do you think of speaking in tongues." Before I answer, I would make a two-fold disclaimer. 1) What I think is of no importance. What is important is the truth, and only the Bible can be relied on for truth. 2) My attitude toward those who claim to speak in tongues is one of love – this issue is not a test of fellowship with me. Every one who is a child of God is my brother, whether or not he is in error on this subject. As James says, in many things we all stumble, but all who love God also love the truth and rejoice to be corrected in it.

**TONGUES A LANGUAGE.** On the Day of Pentecost, the apostles "began to speak with other tongues." (Acts 2:4) There were about 16 different dialects or languages represented in the audience, and they all heard in their own language (Vs. 8). All languages are known by some people or tribe. The concept of an unknown tongue comes from the King James Bible in which the translators have inserted the word unknown, and put it in italics to indicate that it is not in the original Greek scriptures. Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11, which speaks of "men of strange tongues." This simply means a people of a foreign language, which would be a strange tongue. It doesn't mean ecstatic utterances, the babble and gibberish often thought to be a "tongue."

**THE PURPOSE.** The apostles received special gifts for the purpose of "confirming" the word that they preached. The promise was: "in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover" (Mk.

16:17,18)... “And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word with signs following” (Vs. 20). One wonders why advocates of speaking in tongues ignore the other signs, such as taking up serpents, drinking poison, and healing the sick.

Paul writes that the gift of tongues was for a sign, a sign that would authenticate their message (I Cor 14:22). But he makes it clear that this was a special gift for only some. “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret” (12:29-30)? The implied answer to all these questions is “No.” The idea that every Christian should speak in tongues is foreign to the Bible.

Often the scripture is quoted: “Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever,” to claim that if he gave this power in apostolic times, it must still be given today. But we do not see God creating women out of men’s ribs, nor do we see children born to virgin mothers. And when was the last time we saw fire and brimstone wipe out a wicked city as happened at Sodom? God being changeless does not require that He is bound to repeat some action over and over upon demand.

The apostle Paul contrasts the transitoriness of the “gifts” of the Spirit, in the time when God’s revelation was incomplete, with the permanence of faith, hope, and love, which would remain after the Bible had been completed. “Love never fails (never will cease) but whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge (as a gift of the Spirit) it shall be done away” (1 Cor. 13:8). These gifts were for the beginning and foundation of the church. No longer does Christ appoint apostles and workers of miracles.

**THE REGULATIONS.** Chapter 14 in First Corinthians is the one which is usually cited to support speaking in tongues. But in this chapter the apostle Paul severely criticizes this practice. Note the following:

1. The church at Corinth was full of sin and strife, and the only church singled out for severe criticism.

2. Paul said that their practice of tongues was worthless. “No man understands,” he said, but they speak mysteries, and speaking into the air without significance (Verses 2:9-10). He said that five words with understanding were better than ten thousand words in a tongue (Vs.19).

3. All things are to be done “unto edifying.” This disqualifies the so-called “unknown” tongues used in Pentecostal groups.

4. If there is no interpreter, “let him keep silence in the church: and let him speak to himself, and to God” (Vs. 28). This rule is violated in thousands of churches every week.

No one has the authority nor the power to regulate God’s spirit. Yet, here is Paul, laying out the rules and regulations for speaking in tongues. Obviously, Paul did not consider this to be the work of God’s Holy Spirit.

**EXPERIENCE IS SUBJECTIVE.** Subjective experience often has more power over one than objective truth. “I know what happened to me, and I know it is from God,” one will say. When the group of preachers mentioned at the beginning were skeptical of the claims being made by one of our colleagues, his answer was, “I, too, was skeptical, until it happened to me. Now I know this is real, and there can be no doubt.” But the fact that he confessed that he had to “practice” all night long in order to speak in these “tongues” betrayed the experience that it was not given by God but was rather the result of psychological forces that had been at work in his personality for some time. He was sincere, but sincerely mistaken. He went on to make certain prophecies, which he believed, but which were false and went unfulfilled.

At one point we were told that to receive the gift you should put your mind in neutral, and let your tongue loose.” No such instructions are needed for a miraculous gift from God. Besides that, scripture instructs us to maintain self-control at all times and to understand what we are doing and act with purpose. Not only is it contrary to biblical teaching to allow one’s mind to become neutral, it is a dangerous invitation to many false teachings.

Experience and feelings are not dependable. Emotional ecstatic speech (so-called tongues) was experienced by pagans many years before the time of Christ, and it made them feel secure in their pagan religion. Faith is not to be based on our feelings, but on the word of God. Jesus said that many would claim to have prophesied and done mighty works in his name, but he will say to them, “I never knew you: depart from me, you that work iniquity” (Matt. 7:22-23).

**DISILLUSIONMENT.** Many who were emotionally captured by this exciting activity later gave it up, disillusioned and disappointed. One preacher who had found himself speaking in tongues came to visit me one day, and as we prayed he let loose with some of the ecstatic expressions. Then he asked me if I thought that was a language that God had given him. Obviously if it had been, he would not have had to ask me. He gave up the tongues practice. None of the other preachers who had joined in this practice continued in the work of preaching the gospel. Yet, the main purpose of “other tongues” was to proclaim the gospel. The modern “tongues” movement has resulted in division, confusion, and disillusion – the very things that Paul had warned against in I Corinthians Chapters 12 through 14.

Some teach that speaking in tongues is a sign that one has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Not so. Every Christian is given the abiding presence of God’s Holy Spirit. Here is the promise: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the Gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

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