

## Should We Expect to Speak in Tongues Today?

When dealing with the modern tongues movement, it is important to see if what is taking place today is identical to what took place in the New Testament. Current practitioners of tongues claim that this gift of the Spirit is, for the most part, for private devotional use. They suggest that it is ecstatic (i.e., spontaneous, emotional, and without linguistic form). Some call it a heavenly or prayer language. J.I. Packer's statement on what qualifies as a biblical tongue is instructive: "Glossolalia (tongues) is not as is often thought, an ecstatic thing. Christian speaking in tongues is done as objectively as any other speaking, while the person is in full possession and control of his wits and volition."<sup>1</sup> There are three features about first-century tongues that should be used as a guideline for comparing present-day tongues.

### **Feature #1: Tongues were *known* languages.**

According to Acts 1:6, "each one heard them speaking in his own language." There were no unintelligible sounds or gibberish that normally passes for tongues. Instead, the crowd understood what was being said. William Samarin, linguistic expert at the University of Toronto, wrote:

Over a period of five years I have taken part in meetings in Italy, Holland, Jamaica, Canada, and the United States. I have observed old-fashioned Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals; I have been in small meetings at private homes as well as in mammoth public meetings; I have seen such different cultural settings as are found among the Puerto Ricans of the Bronx, the snake handlers of the Appalachians and Russian Molakans in Los Angeles...Glossolalia is indeed like language in some ways, but this is only because the speaker (unconsciously) wants it to be like language. Yet in spite of superficial similarities, glossolalia is fundamentally not language."<sup>2</sup>

Many people who practice tongues say that one has to switch off his mind for the gift to operate properly, but the speaking in the Bible, it did not go beyond human comprehension. People kept their minds intact. Many even suggest that it is a heavenly language because of a misappropriation of Paul's words about "tongues...of angels" (1 Cor 13:1. This was not "heavenly dialect" or prayer language. Paul, as he often did, used exaggeration to make his point, as he had already mentioned about giving all his possessions to the poor and his body to be burned. Everywhere that angels speak in Scripture, they use human language (Lk 1:11-20, 26-37; 2:8-14).

### **Feature #2: Content of tongues was praise to God.**

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<sup>1</sup> J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step*, 177-178.

<sup>2</sup> William Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels*, 103.

Paul had to correct the Corinthians for their misuse of tongues. According to 1 Corinthians 14:16-17, they were selfish and ignorant of the needs of others in the congregation. They were seeking only to gratify their own egos and show how spiritual they were by wanting the greater gifts, so Paul shows them a more excellent way in chapter 13. The emphasis of tongues was not supposed to be a promotion of self-glory, but was one of rehearsing the “wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:11; 10:46).

### **Feature #3: Tongues were a sign to unbelievers.**

“Tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers” (1 Corinthians 14:22). At Pentecost, for instance, the Gospel message that was presented spoke to the hearts of unbelieving Jews, and three thousand embraced Christ as Messiah (Acts 2:41). It was this sign that showed them God had begun a new work that includes Gentiles, as well as Jews. The Church Age had been ushered in, and the people of God would now form the church, in which redeemed Jews and Gentiles would serve God together. As a sign, tongues are an inferior gift that cannot build up the church because it does not meet the biblical qualification of instruct.

### **“They will cease” (1 Cor 13:8)**

In this chapter Paul gives the comparison of love and tongues. Love never fails. The Greek word for fails can also be translated as “decay” or “to be abolished.” In other words, it is eternal. Tongues, on the other hand, will cease. The Greek word (pauo) means “to cease permanently.” Thus, they will never start up again.

Noted expositor, John MacArthur, in his NT commentary gives 6 reasons for the ceasing of tongues in the apostolic era.<sup>3</sup> Other respected language experts, like A.T. Robertson, affirms this intrinsic cessation.<sup>4</sup> The Greek middle voice of the verb makes the case that they will make themselves cease or automatically cease of themselves.

Following are possibilities of why they ceased in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.

Take, for example, Scriptural history. They were miraculous, revelatory gifts that became obsolete once the miracle-working apostles finished penning God’s revelation.<sup>5</sup> The last-recorded miracle was around A.D. 58 on Malta (Acts 28:7-10). From A.D. 58-96, when the last book was penned, there were no miracles recorded. Tongues are only mentioned in 1 Corinthians, which was written rather early. However, Ephesians and Romans, which mention spiritual gifts, say nothing of miraculous gifts.

Furthermore, examine Church History. Two of the most-respected theologians in the history of the early church were Chrysostom and Augustine, both of whom considered tongues to be no longer in use. In the fourth century, Chrysostom claimed it had been an obscure practice, and was not even sure about

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *The New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 359-61.

<sup>4</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 4:179.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this point, see my article on “Canonicity and Revelation.”

its characteristics.<sup>6</sup> He even asks and answers a good question: “How then brethren, because he that is baptized in Christ, and believes on Him, does not now speak in the tongues of all nations, are we not to believe that he has received the Holy Ghost? God forbid that our heart should be tempted by this faithlessness...Why is it that no man speaks in the tongues of all nations? Because the church itself now speaks in the tongues of all nations. Before the Church was in one nation, where it spoke in the tongues of all. By speaking then in the tongues of all, it signified what was to come to pass: that by growing among nations, it would speak in the tongues of all.”<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, we believe that there is no more need for the sign gift of tongues. Much of what takes place today is far different from the biblical record of tongues.

**Further Reading:**

*Charismatic Chaos*, John MacArthur

*Charismatic Challenge*, John Napier

*The Charismatic Catastrophe*, George Garner

*The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit*, Larry Pettegrew

*The Holy Spirit*, Robert Gromacki

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 7:497.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John*, 195.