

Speaking in Tongues

A Short Study

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According to its advocates, speaking in tongues is a gift given by God that enables a Christian to speak in a language that was previously unknown to him or her. This gift can have two purposes. First, it can be an evangelistic tool. Perhaps some other person who does not understand the language will hear the Christian speaking in tongues. God will use the message of the miraculously spoken words to bring that person to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord. A second suggested purpose for tongues is its use as a private prayer language that spiritually strengthens the individual.

Speaking in tongues can be both an exhilarating topic and a confusing one. How exciting to think that God would enable you miraculously to speak in a language that you had never known before! But speaking in tongues can also create nagging doubt in Christians. What if you ask God for the gift, but he doesn't give it to you? Why would God deny you a gift that he gives to other believers? Could it be that maybe you are not even a Christian in the first place?

How should we approach this subject of speaking in tongues? Any Bible teacher will tell you that we need to study what God's Word has to say about the subject. But we also need to think carefully about how we are going to study what the Bible says. Well-meaning friends may point out a verse here or there in the New Testament that seems to indicate the importance of speaking in tongues. Is that the best approach?

Every topic in the Bible needs to be approached using a careful and deliberate method of interpretation. Before putting together verses that come from various places in the Bible, those verses need to be studied in their contexts. For example, instead of looking at one verse in Acts and then moving immediately to a verse in 1 Corinthians, it would be better to study the verse in Acts by itself. How does that passage in Acts contribute to the overall message of Acts? What is Paul's total message about tongues in 1 Corinthians? Only after understanding the various passages in their immediate context should we try to pull all of our knowledge about the subject together.

Someone may ask why it is important to study individual books of the Bible by themselves first. Isn't the entire Bible to be considered as God's inspired Word? Let's remember that the New Testament did not suddenly appear in first century bookstores as a single unit. The books were originally written and read as individual works. Only later were they bound together in a single volume. In other words, Luke did not write Acts with the idea that his readers would automatically use Paul's letter of 1 Corinthians as an additional resource. Acts was intended to be a book whose message could be understood on its own. Likewise, Paul did not write to the Corinthians about speaking in tongues knowing that they could check cross-references in the book of Acts to answer any additional questions on the subject. Therefore, it would be wise for us to approach the books of the New Testament that way also. What does Acts say about speaking in tongues? What does 1 Corinthians say on the subject? Only after we have answered those questions should we start to pull together the results of our study and come to conclusions about the New Testament's overall teaching about tongues.

In the following pages we will look at the three most commonly cited sections of the New Testament on the subject of speaking in tongues. The purpose will not be to provide a complete

interpretation of each passage. Instead I will make some brief suggestions about the passages that I hope will stimulate your own study.

Mark 16

Mark 16:17 says, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues.” That verse does teach that believers in Jesus will speak in tongues, but it must be asked whether that verse is actually a part of the inspired Word of God.

Modern Bible translations usually include a footnote or comment about Mark 16:9-20. For example, the New International Version states in brackets, “The two most reliable early manuscripts do not have Mark 16:9-20.” The authenticity of these verses may also be questioned because of some noteworthy characteristics. The connection of verse 8 with the following verses is awkward; Mary Magdalene is identified in verse 9 as if she is new to the narrative even though she has already appeared in chapter 16. The vocabulary and style of the verses also differ considerably from what is found in the rest of Mark’s Gospel. The content of the verses seem to be a summary of resurrection appearances taken from the other three Gospels.

For these reasons most scholars conclude that verses 9-20 are not the original ending to Mark but instead date from early in the second century. Therefore, we should be hesitant to base any conclusions about speaking in tongues on such a questionable passage.

The Book of Acts

No similar doubts can be raised about speaking in tongues in the Book of Acts. Luke, the author of Acts, records several instances in which Christians in the early church did speak in languages that were previously unknown to them. The question is what we are to make of those accounts. Are they an indication that Christians today are to speak in tongues also? Or could they be experiences that were for some reason unique to the early church?

We must ask what the overall purpose of Acts is. Did Luke intend it to be a handbook to instruct the individual believer in what he or she should expect in the Christian life? Or was he recording the early history of the church to demonstrate how God led the church to spread the good news of Jesus across the Roman Empire? If the latter was Luke’s purpose, there are still many valuable lessons that can be learned about what God wants for the church and for Christians today, but there may also be experiences in Acts that were unique to the early church’s experience.

In Acts 1:8, Luke quotes a statement from Jesus that then serves to explain where Luke’s account will take the reader. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in *Jerusalem*, and in all *Judea and Samaria*, and *to the ends of the earth*” (emphasis added). Acts then explains how that prophecy was fulfilled. The first seven chapters describe the early church’s work in Jerusalem. Chapters 8 through 12 record how the good news spread in Judea and Samaria. The final sixteen chapters record how the message of Jesus spread throughout the massive Roman Empire.

Acts tells us not only about the geographical expansion of the gospel but also about its ethnic expansion. The church started off as a small group limited to Jewish believers in Jesus. Then some Samaritans came to faith in Christ. Who were the Samaritans? There were an ethnic group with some connections to the Jews, and they believed like the Jews did in the first five books of the Old Testament. In the first century, however, the Jews did not accept the Samaritans as members of God's holy people. But God opened the eyes of the apostles to his desire that Samaritans too share in God's love through Christ. Acts continues by telling next how the gospel spread to God-fearers. They were non-Jews or Gentiles who were attracted to the Jewish belief in one God but who had not converted to Judaism. Then Acts continues by recording how Paul preached to Gentiles who had shown no previous interest in Judaism at all. A survey of Acts, therefore, shows how God led the early church to understand that the good news of Jesus was for all people! No geographic or ethnic barrier kept people from trusting in Christ and receiving new life through him.

How does the subject of speaking in tongues fit into the development of Luke's history? Acts 2 tells us that on the day of Pentecost the Christians spoke in tongues and that "God-fearing Jews from every nation" responded by saying, "we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:5, 11). God used the gift of tongues to declare his intention that Jews from every nation and not just the ones in Jerusalem could be recipients of the salvation that came through Jesus.

In Acts 8 the apostles heard that Samaritans had "accepted the word of God" (Acts 8:14). Could it be that God would allow even the lowly and despised Samaritans to trust in Christ and become part of God's family? The apostles sent Peter and John to check out this strange and unexpected development.

When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:15-17)

Do these verses teach that the gift of the Holy Spirit comes as a second stage in the Christian life? Or did God delay his giving of the Holy Spirit because he wanted to teach the ethnically Jewish apostles that his love was intended even for the Samaritans?

Acts 10-11 record another breakthrough for the gospel. The story of the Roman centurion Cornelius demonstrates God's love for God-fearers, those Gentiles who were on the fringe of Judaism. Through a series of visions God told Peter not to call impure anything God had made clean (Acts 10:15). Peter did not understand the vision until messengers arrived asking Peter to come to Cornelius's house. God wanted Peter, a Jew, to visit a Gentile. That in itself was astounding! In the course of Peter's explanation of the good news to Cornelius and those gathered in his house, a miracle occurred.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the

gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:44-46)

Peter later explained this incredible development to the Christians in Jerusalem. He specifically cited the giving of the Holy Spirit to people in Cornelius's house as the sign that showed him that they should be accepted as full members of the people of God (Acts 11:15-18). Once again the Jewish Christians had their eyes opened to the immensity of God's love. Even Gentiles could become Christians! God had confirmed it with the miraculous gift of speaking in tongues.

One more account of speaking in tongues is recorded in Acts. Chapter 19 records how some followers of John the Baptist in the city of Ephesus learned about Jesus and were baptized. "When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied" (Acts 19:6). In the first century there were evidently large numbers of Jews spread through the Roman Empire that had learned of John's message and had responded by repenting. When reports about Jesus started to circulate, they wondered what relation Jesus had to the message of John the Baptist. The gift of the Holy Spirit and the ability to speak in tongues served as a confirmation that Jesus was the one who fulfilled John's prophecies.

This quick survey of Acts demonstrates how the good news of Jesus spread both geographically and ethnically. Jesus is for all people and not just for the Jews! In order for the apostles and early Christians, who came from a Jewish background, to grasp the startling dimensions of God's love, God brought about remarkable circumstances and events. Speaking in tongues was one key element that God used to get his message across.

Understanding how speaking in tongues fits into the overall message of Acts helps us see the purpose of speaking in tongues in the first century. God used the gift in a remarkable way to teach about his love. Once the church grasped the universal message of God's love, however, was the gift of speaking in tongues still necessary? Could it be that speaking in tongues was something that was limited to the early church because of its unique circumstances?

1 Corinthians 12-14

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses the subject of spiritual gifts at length. He addresses the topic from many angles and gives a variety of comments and instructions. He even says about tongues: "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:5a). That would seem to settle any question that we might have about whether Christians should want to speak in tongues!

Let's remember one of the basic principles of interpretation. We want to understand Paul's entire message and interpret each individual verse in light of that entire message. I suggest that there are three factors that we should keep in mind in interpreting 1 Corinthians.

First, Paul is writing to a troubled church. The Corinthian church is suffering from division and immorality, and they misunderstand a variety of subjects. Paul writes to the Corinthians to resolve the problems and to address the troubling issues that have arisen in the church. What does that tell us about his teaching on the subject of tongues? It tells us simply

that the reason he talks about the subject at all is because it is a troublesome issue in the church. Paul's concern is not that the Corinthians are lacking some spiritual gift that he knows that they need to have. Paul does not think as he wrote his letter: "I know something that the Corinthians are missing in their walk with God. It's the gift of speaking in tongues. I think that I had better tell them about this wonderful gift so that they can become spiritually mature." No, Paul addresses this issue because the situation in Corinth demands it. Speaking in tongues is already a reality in the church. His desire is to put an end to the abuses that are taking place in the church.

Second, the specific statements that Paul makes about tongues need to be read in light of all that he teaches in chapters 12 through 14. Take some time and read all of 1 Corinthians 12 through 14. Then ask yourself what Paul's major message is in those three chapters. How would you summarize the major things that Paul is urging the Corinthians to do?

Is Paul urging the Corinthians to seek after the experience of speaking in tongues? Or is Paul's major message one about how the Corinthians are to love each other and to work toward the strengthening of the church? Evidently the Christians in Corinth are so concerned about their own experiences that they have lost sight of the other members of the church. Each person is following his or her own desires, and the church is in chaos as a result.

But what about those specific statements that Paul makes about speaking in tongues? Just because Paul's major message is on love and order in the church, that doesn't mean that we can't learn anything about speaking in tongues. That brings us to the third factor that we need to keep in mind as we read Paul's letter. Take note of Paul's pastoral method. Sometimes error needs to be confronted head-on, but at other times it is wiser to take another course with people who are misguided. Sometimes it is best to affirm what they believe but then gently try to redirect their attention to something that is more important.

This can be called the "yes . . . but" approach to dealing with error. For example, a parent might say, "Yes, it is fun to watch television, *but* it is more important for you to get a good night's sleep." What is the effect of such a statement? The child does not get to watch TV, but the parent does not unnecessarily upset the child by giving a simple no. Instead attention is focused on what is more important.

Could it be that Paul is using such a pastoral approach in his teaching about tongues? Does Paul use it any place else in his first letter to the Corinthians? As a matter of fact, he does. The Corinthians have evidently written to Paul asking him about various issues. He begins to address their questions in 1 Corinthians 7:1.¹ "Now for the matters you wrote about. 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.'" Paul starts there by quoting the teaching that is circulating among the Corinthians. Some among the Corinthian Christians are teaching that "it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." What does Paul do with that teaching? He does not come right out and contradict it. Instead he goes on and asks them to look at the subject from a different angle. "*But* since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband" (1 Cor.

¹ *Today's New International Version* is quoted for 1 Cor. 7:1; 8:1, and 10:23 because it provides a much better translation of these verses than the *New International Version*.

7:2 emphasis added). Notice Paul's "yes . . . but" approach. He takes what they say in stride and then points them in a different direction.

Paul takes the same approach in chapter 8. "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'We all possess knowledge.'" Paul again quotes the teaching about knowledge that the Corinthians have been following. Evidently they think that because they know that idols are not real gods, they can do anything they want with food that has been sacrificed to those worthless and meaningless idols. Paul continues, "*But* knowledge puffs up while love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1 emphasis added). Once again Paul does not contradict what the Corinthians say. He simply introduces a new perspective on the topic.

Paul uses the "yes . . . but" approach again. "'I have the right to do anything,' you say—*but* not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'—*but* not everything is constructive" (1 Cor. 10:23 emphasis added). Paul approaches the Corinthians as a wise pastor. He does not come out and rebuke them harshly. Instead he asks them to consider another factor in their decision-making process.

Because Paul has already used the 'yes . . . but' approach with the Corinthians, it must be asked whether he is doing that again when he comes to the subject of spiritual gifts.

For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. *But* everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, *but* he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, *but* I would rather have you prophesy. (1 Cor. 14:2-5, emphasis added)

What is Paul actually saying here? Is he encouraging them to speak in tongues, or is he gently redirecting their thoughts to the more important issue of working hard to strengthen others in the church?

When 1 Corinthians 12-14 are approached with these three factors in mind, speaking in tongues becomes relatively unimportant. Paul doesn't totally discount the Corinthians' experiences, but neither does he urge them to continue in those experiences. Instead he redirects their thinking to things that are far more important. "Love one another," he says, "and make it your goal to build up the church."

Where Does This Leave Us?

Studying these three passages about speaking in tongues does not lead us to the conclusion that Christians today need to seek after the gift of speaking in tongues. Neither do we find in any of Paul's other correspondence any encouragement to learn to speak in tongues or to seek after the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In fact, in some of his other letters (Rom. 8:9-11; Gal. 3:2-5), Paul assumes that everyone who is a believer in Christ has already been baptized with the Spirit. But this study does more than bring us to a negative conclusion. It reminds us that we should seek after the truly important things.

First, make it your goal to love Jesus and to love others. God is most interested in your love for him. And hasn't the study of 1 Corinthians indicated that God wants us to focus less on our own experiences and more on what we can do to help other believers? You can be sure that you won't go wrong if you concentrate on loving God and loving the other members of his family.

Tell God that you want everything that he has for you through his Holy Spirit. Then leave it up to him. If, for some reason, God wants you to speak in tongues, he can give you that gift. If he wants you to have it, he will make sure that you receive it. So trust him.

Second, watch out for spiritual elitism. Some (but not all) advocates of speaking in tongues give the impression that unless you can speak in tongues you are in some way an inferior or second-class Christian. Paul encountered a similar problem with the Christians in Colosse. Some of the believers there had been made to feel inferior due to other people's practices and experiences. Look at what he urged the Colossians to do in response.

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head. (Col. 3:16-19a)

Don't give in to messages that you are second-rate in the kingdom of God just because you do not speak in tongues. There is no need to compare yourself to any other believer. (And be sure that you don't look down on someone who does speak in tongues!) Just stay connected to the Head, Jesus Christ. Rest in what he has done for you through his death and resurrection.

That's really what it all comes down to. Stay connected to Jesus himself. Make it your goal simply to love him and obey him. Then trust Jesus that he will give you all that you need in your daily walk with him.