

You may see many people today on TV “speaking in tongues” or you may know of people who attend a church that teaches the doctrine of “tongues-speaking.” You may have even been in a prayer meeting when someone burst into an ecstatic utterance, later identifying it as the gift of tongues. Several questions have probably entered your mind, “What is this person doing?” “What is the gift of tongues?” “Is this really biblical tongues?” These are real questions that need to be addressed. This practice of ecstatic utterance is on the rise in our day – in America and around the world.

The best way to find out the truth about a matter is to go right to the source. We need to look at what the Bible says about the gift of tongues in order to understand it. Then, we can compare what we see occurring today to the light of truth in order to know how to respond.

The Terminology: the term “tongue” or “tongues” appears 141x in the Bible. Its range of meaning includes an organ of speech, a language and it can be used figuratively (tongues as of fire [Acts 2:4]). Only in the New Testament is it qualified as a gift that is distributed by the Holy Spirit (Acts, 1 Cor. 12). This study will focus upon its meaning as a language.

The Origin – it will be helpful to see how speaking in tongues was first understood in Scriptures. In the context of a language, speaking in tongues is first mentioned in Acts 2. The disciples were gathered together in one place and, when they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in what the Bible calls “other” languages. That is, languages other than that which was normal for them.

Notice the following observations:

- It was a gift of the Holy Spirit (v.4).
- It was a gift of speech, not hearing (v. 4).
- It was language foreign to the speaker (i.e. – they had not been trained in it) (v. 4. 6-8).
- It was a known language (v. 9-11).
- It was a sign that was accompanied by the preaching of the gospel (vv. 14-40).

The Purpose – the purpose of this gift is revealed to us in several ways.

First, it is prophesied in the Old Testament that this manifestation would occur.

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah, foretold of a day when God would speak to the Jewish people through a nation “of stammering lips and a foreign tongue” (Isa. 28:11) and “whose language they do not know” (Jer. 5:15). These prophecies are given under the auspices of God’s judgment upon the nation. Paul confirms this in 1 Corinthians 14:21, applying it as a sign to unbelievers. So tongues was a sign gift showing God’s judgment to unbelievers.

Second, we can see the purpose of the gift of tongues by its unfolding throughout the book of Acts.

The book of Acts was written by Luke, a physician, traveling companion of Paul and a meticulous historian. In Acts, he records for us what God was doing in the foundational stages of the church. It is noteworthy that tongues only appears 6x in our context in the book of Acts as we will see.

Acts 8 – the first appearance of tongues after the Day of Pentecost is in this chapter. Philip, the evangelist, went to Samaria and preached the gospel to the people there and many were saved (vv. 4-8, 12). However, the Holy Spirit had not come upon them yet. The Samaritans and the Jews hated each other and for them to come into the church apart from the authority of the Apostles who were designated by Christ as the foundational leaders of the church, there would have been immediate division. When Peter and John came to Samaria and prayed for them, they received the Holy Spirit and came into the church under the leadership and authority of the Apostles (vv. 14-17). Apparently some outward sign of their receiving the Holy Spirit was manifested, for Simon the Sorcerer saw it and wanted to buy divine power (v.18). While tongues are not mentioned, this is presumably the same gift that the Jews manifested at Pentecost. The Samaritans entered the church in the same way as the Jews.

Acts 10 – the next occurrence is when Peter went to Cornelius’ house and proclaimed the good news to him and those in his household. Again, when the Holy Spirit fell upon them, they began speaking in tongues (v.46). This is another occurrence of a group, hated by the Jews, entering the church in the same manner as they did at Pentecost (v.47). Peter even indicated in vv. 34-35 that he had become aware that God was doing something different. Though He had once used Israel as the vehicle through whom the nations would be saved, he was now coming directly to all the nations. Peter’s companions were amazed, not that Gentiles could be saved, but that they came

into the church on equal footing with the Jews (v.45). Peter confirms that the significance of this event is that same thing occurred to the Gentiles that occurred to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost (11:15-18).

Acts 19:1-7 – the last mention of tongues in the book of Acts is when John the Baptist's disciples, who had not heard that the Christ had come, entered the church. Paul preached Christ to them and they believed (vv. 4-5). They then received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues (v.6).

So, it can be demonstrated that the purpose of tongues as recorded in the book of Acts was a confirming sign that various people-groups had now been included into Christ's church on the same basis. In Christ, there is no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all peoples come to Christ on an equal basis (Gal. 3:27). Tongues were the outward sign to the Jews that God had changed His program, that a new dispensation was beginning.

1 Corinthians 12-14 – the only other New Testament occurrence of the phenomenon of speaking in tongues is found in this book by the Apostle Paul. The focus of this section is that the use of any gift must be characterized by love, something that the Corinthians had missed. They had been abusing the gift. For our study, it is important to note that the word is found twenty times in these three chapters, yet Paul says nothing indicating a change in the meaning of tongues from that found in the book of Acts. The gift is revelatory within the confines of the church, requiring an interpretation (1 Cor. 14:26-28).

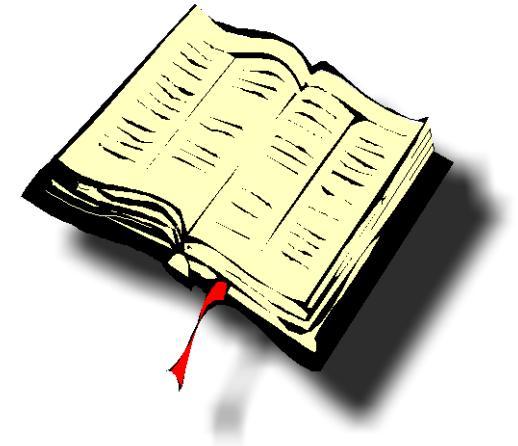
Conclusion: Biblical tongues is a gift that is manifested by the Holy Spirit. It is the supernatural ability to speak in a known language in which one has never been trained – one other than one's own native language.

The purpose of tongues, according to Scripture, is as a sign. It was a sign to Jews that God's vehicle through which salvation would come had changed. The national scope of peoples coming to God through Israel was giving way to all peoples coming to the Messiah directly through the preaching of the gospel and on an equal basis with all other peoples, including the Jews. It is also a revelatory gift, according to 1 Corinthians. In order for it to fulfill its function, it must be interpreted.

Now one may ask appropriate questions regarding those who claim to speak in tongues today:

- Does this align itself with what the Bible says about the purpose and function of tongues-speaking?
- Does this meet the criteria of confirmation of God's plan for the church?
- Does it demonstrate judgment toward unbelieving Jews?
- Is this a known language?
- Is there an interpreter?

If the answer to any or all of these questions is, "No," then one should dismiss the phenomenon as man-centered and unbiblical – something to be avoided, not embraced.



"Thy Word is Truth"
(John 17:17b)

What does the Bible Say About the Gift of Tongues?

Part 1 – What is it?

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