

CHARISMATIC TONGUES EXAMINED

“Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.” (1 Cor 14:19)

*by
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The Charismatic Movement has popularized tongue-speaking in many churches. Some claim that tongue-speaking has brought revival to the church, while others observe that it has caused confusion instead. Should Christians speak in tongues today? What does the Bible teach concerning tongues?

A Supernatural Gift of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the One who enables a person to speak in tongues (1 Cor 12:4, 8-10). It is He who decides which gift or gifts a Christian should have (1 Cor 12:11). If it is not the will of the Holy Spirit that a person should have the gift of tongues, he will not have it even if he seeks it through much prayer and fasting. Paul has made it very clear that not everyone will have the same gifts: “Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?” (1 Cor 12-29-30). These rhetorical questions expect the answer, “No.” Not everyone will have the gift of tongues, and be able to speak in tongues.

It is also important to note that when the gift of tongues is given to an individual, the Holy Spirit supernaturally enables him to speak in tongues. One does not need to go through any speech training in order to exercise the gift. Tongue-speaking is not letting one's tongue "roll" in super-quick *hallelujahs* till one gibbers. Such self-induced and self-taught tongues are not biblical tongues. The ability to speak in tongues is God-given, not man-made!

Foreign Languages or Ecstatic Utterances?

The first instance of tongue-speaking was at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit filled the disciples of Christ, and they began to speak "with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4). The Greek word *glossai* (tongues) means "languages." The Apostles at Pentecost were supernaturally empowered to speak in foreign languages they had not previously learned. This is proven by the fact that when they spoke in tongues, the people were amazed because "every man heard them speak in his own language (literally, "dialect")," and questioned among themselves, "Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our

own tongue (dialect), wherein we were born?” (Acts 2:6,8). Who were these people who heard the Apostles speak? They were “Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues (languages) the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:9-11). Luke the inspired historian would have us know that when the Apostles spoke in tongues, they spoke in foreign languages or ethnic dialects. Tongue-speaking is not ecstatic speech or gibberish. The gift of tongues is the gift of languages.

It is readily admitted by many modern tongue-speakers that the tongues they speak are not human (i.e. foreign languages) but angelic tongues (i.e. ecstatic utterances, cf 1 Cor 13:1). As far as we know from Scripture, whenever the angels spoke, they did so in human languages, namely, Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. In any case, it ought to be understood that Paul was using hyperbolic speech here. A hyperbole is an intended exaggeration to drive home a desired point. Paul was not saying that he is able to speak in angelic

tongues (or that there is such a thing as tongues of angels), or understand all mysteries, have all knowledge, or move mountains. He is saying that even if he can do all those things, but does not have love, he is a big zero. To understand 1 Cor 13:1-2 other than this is to miss Paul's point.

The confusion over tongue-speaking is not new. Paul found absolute confusion over the use of spiritual gifts in the church at Corinth (1 Cor 12-14). The gift of tongues was abused by the Christians there. Every member in church wanted to speak in tongues. Obviously, some did not have the gift, but pretended to have it by speaking ecstatically.

It needs to be clarified that the "unknown tongue" (so KJV) Paul speaks of is not ecstatic speech but foreign language (1 Cor 14:2). It is "unknown" in the sense that the gifted man is able to speak in a foreign language he has never learned or heard before, and that it is unintelligible to the hearer who does not know the language spoken. In ordinary circumstances, when a person speaks in tongues in his own native church, no man understands; only God understands since He understands all languages (1 Cor 14:2). Thus the one who speaks in tongues edifies only himself since without an interpreter or translator, he is the

only one who understands what he is saying (1 Cor 14:4). Paul emphasized the importance of understanding; “Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue” (1 Cor 14:19).

The central idea Paul was trying to get across was that edification (1 Cor 14:3, 4,5,12,17,26) comes by way of understanding (1 Cor 14:2,7,9,14,15,16,19). Paul said that prophesying is superior to tongue-speaking. The gift of prophecy is the gift of being able to foretell and forthtell the will and word of God. When the prophet speaks, he speaks to his own people in their own native tongue. The members of the church benefit from the words spoken because they are able to understand the message given. The Apostle makes this very clear by using the illustration of music (1 Cor 14:7-8). Music is music only when there is a tune or a melody. How does one expect to appreciate music when the pianist plays only one note throughout, or a random string of notes that does not make up a tune? So unless one speaks in a language that others can understand, one is wasting one’s breath (1 Cor 14:9). A language has grammatical forms

and syntactical structures comprising of nouns, verbs, conjunctions, prepositions, adjectives etc. As Paul said, “There are, ... so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification” (1 Cor 14:10). When a person prays in tongues, he prays with his heart as well as with his mind (1 Cor 14:15). In other words, he knows what he is saying and can identify the language he is speaking. A genuine tongue-speaker will be able to analyse the language he has spoken by identifying the different words he has used, and their respective meanings. The Holy Spirit is perfect. The gifts that come from Him are perfect. The gifted tongue-speaker when given the supernatural ability to speak in a foreign language will be perfectly proficient in that language he is enabled to speak. He will be able to write out the content of his speech, list the vocabulary, and demonstrate the grammatical-syntactical relationship of the words. Are modern-day tongue-speakers able to do this?

A Sign-gift

“Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not” (1 Cor 14:22). What did Paul mean when he said that “tongues are for a sign?” In verse 20, Paul chided

the Corinthians, “Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.” In other words, Paul was telling them, “Know your Bible! Don’t you see the purpose of tongues?” Paul then drew their attention to the Old Testament. In verse 21, the Apostle cited Isa 28:11-12b. The context of Isa 28 is that of judgment. The Israelites have repeatedly refused and stubbornly rejected the clear admonitions of the Lord through His prophet. Since they would not heed the word of the Lord spoken to them in their own native tongue, namely, Hebrew, they would now have to hear it in another language, namely, the Assyrian. “But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken” (Isa 28:13). It was a word of judgment against the unbelieving Israelites.

Therefore, tongues were a sign to unbelieving Jews. The Jews thought that they were the only people to whom God extended salvation. This was a misconception. The gift of tongues was meant to correct this erroneous idea. Consider Peter’s experience in Acts 10. The Lord wanted Peter to

preach the gospel to Cornelius, a Gentile. As a full-blooded Jew, Peter would have nothing to do with a Gentile. But the Lord spoke to Peter in a vision commanding him three times to eat the foods the Jews classified as unclean (Acts 10:11-16). This was to prepare Peter to minister to Cornelius, an unclean person in the eyes of the Jew. When Cornelius sent for Peter, Peter in obedience to the Lord went to see him, and the Scripture says, "While Peter yet spake these words the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed (i.e. Christian Jews) were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God" (Acts 10:44-46). When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was summoned by the Council to account for his visit to a Gentile home. His fellow Apostles and Elders were angry with him because he preached the gospel to Cornelius. How did Peter vindicate himself? Peter told them the whole story, how God spoke to him, and how the Spirit led him to Cornelius' house. Peter testified, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning" (Acts 11:15). Peter saw Cornelius and his household gloriously saved as evinced by their speaking in

tongues just as he did at Pentecost. Peter went on to say, “Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift (i.e. the Holy Spirit) as He did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17). What was the response of the Jerusalem Council who took Peter to task? “When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18). Herein is the purpose of the gift of tongues—a sign to unbelieving Jews. To Peter and the Jerusalem saints, it was a sign of confirmation, but to those who refuse to believe, it is a sign of judgment.

Is there still a need for God to convince Jews that the gospel is also given to Gentiles? There is no need. No longer are Jews preaching the gospel to Gentiles, but Gentiles to Jews! What then is the purpose of tongues today? Since it has accomplished its purpose, has it been withdrawn?

Have Tongues Ceased?

The Apostle Paul, in the first century, told the Corinthians that revelatory gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, will cease: “Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall

cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away” (1 Cor 13:8).

Before we discuss the cessation of tongues, let us deal with the cessation of prophecies and knowledge. Paul said that prophecies “shall fail,” and knowledge “shall vanish away.” The words “fail,” and “vanish away” are the same word in Greek, *katargeo*, which is a very strong word of cessation. It basically means “to destroy” (cf 1 Cor 15:24,26). The word *katargeo* (to destroy) is written in the Greek passive voice. This indicates that there will be an outside agent which will cause prophecies and knowledge to cease. What is this external element? Verses 9-10 gives us the answer: it is “the perfect thing” (*to teleion*). What is this “perfect thing?” It is the completion of the canon (i.e. the 66 books of the Bible). When Paul wrote his epistle to the Corinthians, the New Testament was in the process of being written. Once it is completed—the last book written—revelation will cease. All that God wants man to know concerning Him and us is found in the Bible. It is sufficient and authoritative. It is God’s complete and final revelation to man (2 Tim 3:16-17, Rev 22:18-19).

How about tongues? Paul wrote that tongues “shall cease.” The word “cease” here is the Greek

pauo which means “to stop.” Unlike the gifts of prophecy, and knowledge, which require an external force to cause their cessation, the gift of tongues will cease by itself (Greek middle voice). It will automatically fade away in the course of time when it has served its purpose. G. F. Rendal, a former Charismatic, commented, “This purpose was fully achieved when it was fully admitted that the nations, as well as ‘this people’ (the Jews), benefitted from Jehovah’s salvation. When this fact was universally believed, accepted and no longer contested by anyone, this gift was no longer needed....Stars, as everyone knows, are visible and useful only at night. When the sun rises they disappear. So it is with the gift of tongues. It was only useful during the darkness of an unbelieving Israel who opposed the nations’ salvation. The gift faded out very simply when the Gentiles’ calling came to light. This is what finished off the last of my resistance” (*I Speak in Tongues More Than You All*, 80-1).

Does history confirm the early cessation of tongues? The famous Church Father, Augustine, wrote in the fourth century, “In the earliest time the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spake with tongues, which they had not learned, ‘as the Spirit gave them utterance.’ These

were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, and to shew that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a betokening and it passed away” (‘Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John,’ Vol VII, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, VI, 10). The greatest revival of the Church since Pentecost, namely, the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, was not characterised by tongue-speaking, but powerful preaching. Luther, Calvin, and Knox did not speak in tongues.

The Apostle Paul was trying to drive this point home: the sign gifts which belong to the Apostles (2 Cor 12:12) will pass away. They are temporary gifts. The Church should not pursue them. Christians should rather seek after these three Christian graces: “And now abideth faith, hope, charity; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Cor 13:13). The temporariness of the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge is contrasted with the permanency of the virtues of faith, hope, and love. It is crucial to note Paul’s three-tier argument: (1) Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will cease upon the completion of the Bible, and passing away of the Apostles; (2) Faith, hope, and love are

virtues which will remain throughout the entire Church Age; (3) Faith and hope will be realized when Christ returns. But the greatest of these is love because love, being a divine virtue, will remain forever.

The table below sums up the whole discussion. What are the differences between Biblical tongues and Charismatic tongues?

Biblical Tongues	Charismatic Tongues
Spirit-empowered, and supernaturally given (1 Cor 12:11)	Self-induced and humanly taught
Foreign languages or dialects (Acts 2:6)	Ecstatic utterances or gibberish
Involves both spirit and mind (1 Cor 14:15)	Involves the spirit but not the mind
There is order (1 Cor 14:40)	There is confusion and chaos
Provides edification (1 Cor 14:5)	Promotes ecumenism (<i>Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement</i> , s.v. "Charismatic Movement," by Peter Hocken)

Given only to some according to the will of God (1 Cor 12:30)	Given to all according to the will of man
Temporary gift of the Apostolic Age (1 Cor 13:8)	Permanent gift of the Church Age
Comes with the gift of interpretation (1 Cor 14:13)	Does not necessarily come with the gift of interpretation
Given only to Christians (Mk 16:17, Acts 8:13,17)	Given to professing Christians and Roman Catholics (<i>Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements</i> , s.v. "Catholic Charismatic Renewal," by F. A. Sullivan)
Always controlled (1 Cor 14:27-28)	Often wild, and hysterical
Least of the spiritual gifts (1 Cor 14:5)	Best of the spiritual gifts
Sign to unbelieving Jews (1 Cor 14:22)	Sign of personal spirituality or holiness

It may be clearly seen, in the light of Scripture, that the tongues of the Charismatic Movement are not the same as the tongues of the New Testament. They are not from the same Holy Spirit. God will not confuse His Church for He “is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints” (1 Cor 14:33). What is the solution to the Charismatic confusion? The key is love, for love “rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth” (1 Cor 13:6).

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