

723 Do Christians Speak in Tongues Today?

Phil Sanders

God's Answers to Life's Questions

On the day of Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus, the apostles were endowed with power; they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Some claim to have that same gift today. Today we're asking the question, "Do Christians Speak in Tongues Today?" A recent article in *USA Today* talked about a gathering of many Charismatic Christians who believe they have miraculous, spiritual gifts. Charismatics believe they have the same miraculous gifts that the apostles and early Christians enjoyed. Among these gifts is the ability to speak miraculously in a language one has not learned. Others, however, believe they can speak an ecstatic, heavenly language. For one man, the experience is a direct means of communication with God that is a crucial part of his faith. "It is kind of a high," he said, describing the most common form of speaking in tongues as an indecipherable expression of personal prayer and praise. "It is like being with the Lord. I feel that sense that everything is OK." Is this really from God?

The phenomenon of tongue-speaking in the New Testament is first found in the promise of Jesus in Mark 16:17-18, "And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." Jesus further reveals that the purpose of these miraculous signs was to confirm the gospel message. Mark 16:20 says: "And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs." The purpose of miracles in the first century was to cause people to believe. Hebrews 2:3-4 says: "how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It [that is, this salvation] was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." The miracles showed that God's Word was true.

Well, what was tongue-speaking in the New Testament, and why was it considered a miracle? The answer to this question lies in the book of Acts. Acts 2:1-4 says: "When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." The Bible says they spoke in other tongues. The other tongues here are other languages spoken in the various countries of the time. This is quite clear from the context. Verses 5-8 say: "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?' The Holy Spirit gave them the ability to speak in languages they had never learned. That was the miracle. I have studied French, Greek, Hebrew, and Russian at different points in my life. None of these languages came quickly or easily. Speaking a language I never learned would be a miracle!

We read of other cases of tongue speaking: Acts 10:44-48, the case of Cornelius and his people; and Acts 19:1-7, the twelve disciples of Ephesus. In these cases, we see that the power of tongue speaking was used by God to show his power just as Jesus had promised in Mark 16:17. Cornelius and all the people in his house miraculously spoke in languages even before they believed or

became Christians. God used this sign of tongues in that case not to convince Cornelius or to save Cornelius, but to convince Peter and the Jews that Gentiles (non-Jews) can also be saved through the Gospel. You see, before Peter went to the house of Cornelius in Caesarea, the Jews only preached to Jews. After Peter left Cornelius and came back to Jerusalem he reported to the Jewish church leaders what happened. According to Acts 11:4, Peter told them what happened in chronological order.

Acts 11:11-18 says: "And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' As I began [began] to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." Two things are very important in this story. First, Peter's task was to declare a message (preach words) by which Cornelius and his household would be saved. People are saved by the gospel, not by miraculous gifts. Second, Peter and his brethren had to be convinced that God now accepted the Gentiles. He was not willing to stand in God's way but realized that God had granted repentance to the Gentiles. This is why in Acts 10:48, Peter ordered or commanded Cornelius and his household to be baptized. This, of course, was water baptism so that their sins would be forgiven.

Peter realized that God had poured out his Spirit on Pentecost for all flesh, truly for all flesh, including Gentiles and that all people can equally be saved in Christ. God gave Cornelius and all the others the power to speak in tongues to convince the Jews that Gentiles can be saved. Speaking in tongues was not part of their conversion, but it was to show that the Gentiles also had the right to be Christians. This is what Peter and the Jewish brethren understood and so should we. Speaking in tongues did not save them and it was not a sign of their salvation (they spoke in tongues before they even heard the message or were saved). It was a sign to Peter to accept the Gentiles. In Acts 19:1-7, the apostle Paul taught and baptized some men. When he laid his hands on them, they received certain powers to speak in languages and prophesy. You see, except for the situation at the house of Cornelius, an apostle had to lay his hands on a person to impart a miraculous gift to him.

For instance, the evangelist Philip in Acts 8 (not the apostle) could work miracles, but he could not impart the ability to work miracles to others. When the apostles learned that Philip was evangelizing and converting souls in Samaria, they sent Peter and John. Acts 8:17-20 says: Then they [Peter and John] *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" Only an apostle like Peter, John or Paul could lay hands on another and impart a spiritual gift. The twelve disciples in Acts 19 could not speak in tongues until the apostle Paul laid his hands on them. In 2 Timothy 1:6 Paul reveals that Timothy's gift

came by the laying on of his hands. It took an apostle to grant spiritual gifts. This is one reason why no one today has a miraculous, spiritual gift. There are no apostles alive today to lay hands on us and grant them.

Tongue speaking was only one of nine miraculous gifts the Scriptures describe in 1 Corinthians 12:5-10. Interestingly, *tongues* receives *last* place. Perhaps one reason for this is that the gift of tongues demanded an interpretation. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:7, "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." If there is no interpreter to tell what the tongue speaker is saying, then people won't understand the message. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:6, "But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?" Paul says further in verses 18-19, "I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue." Since all things are to be done for edification, a tongue speaker was to be silent in church unless there was an interpreter (1 Corinthians 14:26-28).

The King James Version sometimes leaves people misinformed by using the phrase "unknown tongue." The term "unknown" is italicized in the King James Version because it does not appear in the original Greek text. The translators were trying to help the English reader understand that the languages to which Paul referred were unknown to the speaker, i.e., the speaker had no prior training by which to learn or know the language. He spoke the language strictly by God's miraculous empowerment. "Unknown" certainly was not intended to convey the thought that the tongues were unknown to all humans and, as such, were non-earthly languages." Tongue-speaking refers to an earthly language, not a heavenly one. Paul said that God would not permit him to speak the inexpressible words he learned while he was in Paradise (2 Corinthians 12:4). God does not permit man to speak the heavenly language. To say the Holy Spirit inspires men to speak a heavenly language is to charge the Holy Spirit with causing men to sin. The problem is not with the Holy Spirit, the problem is that some people read into the text what is not there. "Unknown" tongues were not ecstatic utterances; they were foreign languages.

God gave miraculous gifts to confirm the inspired message, but miraculous gifts were temporary. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10, "Love never fails; but if *there are gifts of prophecy*, they will be done away; if *there are tongues*, they will cease; if *there is knowledge*, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away." In this passage there are things which are in part, and things which are perfect. Miraculous knowledge, tongue-speaking, and prophecy were to cease, because they were partial or done in part. Now whatever the partial is, the perfect must be of the same substance. If the partial is God's revelation in prophecy, knowledge, and tongues, the perfect must be the completion of that revelation found in the written word of God. Some people think that the perfect is a reference to Jesus Christ, but "that which is perfect" cannot mean Jesus because it is in the "neuter" case in the original Greek. It is neuter, not masculine or feminine. Since Jesus is masculine, the neuter word "perfect" doesn't refer to Jesus. It means the perfect thing, not the perfect person. What is the perfect thing? The fully revealed New Testament. You see,

God was giving those special gifts (tongues, prophecies, healings, etc.) to reveal his truth, guide the church and spread the Gospel until he could completely reveal all and close his revelation to man.

Other interpretations apply "perfect" to heaven (the only perfect place), or Christian maturity and perfect love (the perfect condition or quality). But, in context, Paul was not contrasting qualities or places. He was contrasting quantities, i.e., those things that were incomplete and partial (miraculous gifts) with that which would be total and complete (the fully revealed Word of God). Paul's use of "perfect" referred to the completed revelation or totally revealed New Testament Scriptures. As we look further into 1 Corinthians 13, we see the contrast between the spiritual gifts, which were to pass away and cease, and faith, hope, and love, which were to remain. 1 Corinthians 13:13 says, "But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love." What is important to realize is that faith and hope abide until the end of the world, but at that time they will change. Faith is today faith, but at the end of the world it will be sight. 2 Corinthians 5:7 says, "We walk by faith, not by sight." Hope today is longing, but one day it will be sight. Romans 8:24 says, "For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he *already* sees?" It is hope, not sight that remains. Faith and hope will remain until Jesus comes, at which time they will change to sight. The gifts are to cease at a time when faith and hope remain. They were to cease long before the end of time. Paul told the church at Corinth that there was something more excellent than miraculous gifts—that's love. In 1 Corinthians 14:1, Paul urges the church to "pursue love." The spiritual gifts were for an immature church to confirm the word. They ceased so that we could have something better, a complete revelation in the New Testament and the love of God.

In a massive study of glossolalia [what some call tongue-speaking today] from a linguistic perspective, Professor William J. Samarin of the University of Toronto's Department of Linguistics said after more than a decade of careful research that he rejected the view that today's glossolalia found in some denominations is some foreign language that could be understood by another person who knew that language. Samarin concluded that modern glossolalia is a "pseudo-language." He defined glossolalia as "unintelligible babbling speech that exhibits similarity to language but is not systematically derived from or related to known language."¹ As kindly as I know how to say it, many people today are deceived. They think they have a miraculous gift, but all they are really doing is babbling. Unfortunately, many people will believe their experience rather than listen to the word of God. They keep insisting they are speaking a heavenly language, but God doesn't permit men to speak a heavenly language. The recipient of a miraculous gift in the New Testament could control himself (14:32).

We must learn to listen to God's written, perfect revelation. It is always true, but the feelings people have in their hearts is not always true. People can deceive themselves. Look to God's word for the truth. Believe it when you read it. The Bible is always right. To get right with the Lord, don't look for a miraculous gift, go to the "words by which you and your household will be saved." Obey the gospel by loving God; believing that Jesus is Lord, the Christ, and the Son of God; repenting of your sins; and by being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. That, my friend, is the one true gospel. Won't you obey that one true gospel today?

Copyright 2007, Phil Sanders
Concord Road Church of Christ
8221 Concord Rd., Brentwood, TN 37027
1-877-226-5747

phil@God-answers.org

www.tv.God-answers.org

¹William J. Samarin, "Variation and Variables in Religious Glossolalia," Language in Society, ed. Dell Haymes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972 pgs. 121-130.