

# Speaking in Tongues

**Author:** Larry W. Wilson

Many people have asked me what I believe the Bible teaches about the gift of tongues. Some churches teach that speaking in tongues is an affirmation of receiving the Holy Spirit. The Bible provides more information about this interesting subject than most people realize.

## Speaking in Tongues at Pentecost

1. At the time of the Exodus, God required all male Israelites to attend three annual services at a specific place which later, became the city of Jerusalem. **"Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks [later called Pentecost] and the Feast of Tabernacles. No man should appear before the Lord empty-handed"** (Deuteronomy 16:16, insertion and emphases mine)

2. Following the Exodus, the Lord was patient with Israel's rebellion, even though they continued to rebel and remain in apostasy for about 800 years. Finally, during the sixth century B.C., the Lord used King Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Israel.

When Israel learned that destruction was surely coming (Jeremiah 25:9-11), many Jewish families scattered throughout the surrounding nations to avoid death. (See Ezekiel 5:10-15.) After 70 years of Babylonian captivity, many of the offspring born during the exile chose to remain in their adopted homelands. Jewish families were dispersed throughout the Middle East and surrounding nations during this period, and this explains why people spoke so many different languages at Pentecost in A.D. 30.

3. Ten days after Jesus ascended, the day of Pentecost arrived. About 9 a.m. on Sunday morning, (Pentecost always fell on a Sunday), the Holy Spirit descended upon the meeting with a display of intimidating power. There was a violent wind, tongues of fire, and curiously, everyone heard the message in their own language!

**"All of them [the disciples of Jesus] were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. [Then Peter said] 'These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!'"** (Acts 2:4-6;15, insertions and emphases mine)

4. The disciples did something that had never been done before. They spoke to the congregants about Jesus using the native languages and dialects of the congregants: **"Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews**

**and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"** (Acts 2:8-11, emphases mine)

5. When Acts 2 is carefully examined, there is no evidence of an unknown tongue being spoken at Pentecost. Instead, the Bible record clearly indicates that Christ's disciples spoke in the native languages and dialects of the congregants.

## **Paul's Position on Speaking in Tongues**

1. I believe God chose for the Holy Spirit to be manifested at Pentecost (through violent wind, tongues of fire and the miracle of speaking foreign languages) for at least two reasons. First, the gift of speaking foreign languages overcame the impossible barrier which foreign languages create.

Every man heard in his own language the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Second, when the tongues of fire rested upon the disciples, the disciples and the gospel of Jesus were given instant credibility. Three thousand congregants were baptized (Acts 2:41) and when they returned home from Jerusalem, they carried the experience and the gospel of Jesus back to their homeland. Seeds planted at Pentecost sprouted into an array of churches when Paul arrived on the scene years later.

2. Given his unusual calling and experience of associating with Gentile believers, Paul, the Jew, quickly realized that Gentile churches were very different than Jewish synagogues. The Jews remained together in various nations because their ethnicity and their religion made them inseparable.

Early Christianity, on the other hand, was ethnically diverse; it had no traditions, and its doctrines were embryonic. Paul could see that unless the Holy Spirit kept a newly formed church alive, human efforts could not hold it together. At Corinth, the believers were unhappy because they could not determine who was leading the church.

There were Jewish converts who insisted on maintaining Jewish traditions and Gentile converts who were hostile to these assertions. To calm the storm, Paul explained that the Holy Spirit gives different gifts to different people for the purpose of building up the church. After making this point, Paul then said the Holy Spirit Himself – not human beings – determines who will receive a gift from God and what that gift will be: **"All these [gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines."** (1 Corinthians 12:11, insertion and emphasis mine)

Paul provided nine examples showing that the Holy Spirit does not give everyone the same gift: **"To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues** [e.g., the gift of ears – the ability to hear a

foreign language and understand what was said]." (1 Corinthians 12:8-10, emphases and insertion mine)

3. To unify the church in Corinth, Paul established a chain of command: **"And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues."** (1 Corinthians 12:28, emphases mine)

Paul placed "speaking in different kinds of tongues" at the bottom of the list because some people in Corinth were speaking gibberish and after doing so, using this "ability" to wield authority in the church.

4. To combat this silly behavior and more importantly, the ulterior motive behind it, Paul said that unknown tongues (gibberish) really have no place or value among believers: **"Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers."** (1 Corinthians 14:22, emphasis mine)

5. Paul said five intelligible words are of greater value than 10,000 words (of gibberish) spoken in an unknown tongue. **"I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a [gibberish] tongue. Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults."** (1 Corinthians 14:18-20, insertion and emphases mine)

6. Paul conceded that a person might experience a "eureka" moment and be overcome with profound emotion. In this setting, he might speak an unknown tongue (gibberish) to God: **"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."** (1 Corinthians 14:2, emphasis mine)

7. Wisely, Paul did not rule out speaking in foreign languages. (Remember, many of the early Christian churches were filled with ethnically diverse believers speaking many dialects.) However, Paul made it clear that before someone speaks in a foreign tongue, there must be an interpreter who can interpret the speech.

Otherwise, the speaker must remain silent. This requirement eliminates gibberish altogether for two listeners cannot translate gibberish and produce identical results. **"Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. . . . If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. . . . But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."** (1 Corinthians 14:39; 14:28; 14:40, emphasis mine)

8. Finally, Paul appealed to common sense: **". . . Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. . . . Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in [unknown] tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of**

instruction?" (1 Corinthians 14:9, insertion and emphases mine)

## "Did You Receive the Holy Spirit?"

Please consider the following story: **"While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?'**

**They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?' 'John's baptism,' they replied. Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all."** (Acts 19:1-7)

Contrary to what some people infer, there is no indication in Acts 19 that anyone spoke (gibberish) in an unknown tongue. Since Paul was in Ephesus, the gift of tongues was particularly useful. Ephesus was a cosmopolitan city, made up of many nationalities.

People in the city spoke Latin, Greek, Hebrew and various Asian languages and dialects. The gift of tongues at Ephesus parallels the gift of tongues at Pentecost. The impossible barrier of language was overcome and this gift gave credibility to the disciples and the gospel of Jesus. Everyone present at the baptism clearly heard the gospel spoken in their own language!

## Peter's Experience with Cornelius

Many people believe that speaking in tongues is a confirmation of being saved. Notice this passage: **"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 [Cornelius and his family]. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the [power of the] Holy Spirit just as we have.'**" (Acts 10:45-47, insertions and emphases mine)

To appreciate this verse, we have to examine the setting. Peter would not, under ordinary circumstances, enter the house of an "unclean Gentile." Jesus understood Peter's religious paradigm and He gave Peter a vision (about unclean animals) so that when invited to enter the house of Cornelius the Gentile, he would go.

Peter was afraid. He was concerned that he might offend Jewish believers if he went to the home of an uncircumcised Gentile, so Peter gathered a few "circumcised believers" to go with him. Early Jewish converts had a very narrow view of the gospel of Jesus. To them, Jesus was a Jew, the gospel of Jesus was Jewish and in A.D. 34, the Gentiles were not important to the Jews.

Of course, the disciples did not know the profound truths found in Ephesians 2 and Galatians 3 because those chapters had not been written. Therefore, when Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius and his household and the Gentiles began speaking to one another in their native tongue. Peter turned to his circumcised brothers asking, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?"

Because the Holy Spirit enabled the Gentiles to speak in tongues, Peter and his circumcised brothers were forced to acknowledge a profound truth that day: God loves Gentile believers just as much as He loves Jewish believers. Peter said, "**I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.**" (Acts 10:34,35, emphasis mine)

This was the point of the vision God gave to Peter before he went to the home of Cornelius, but the truth and meaning of the vision did not penetrate Peter's paradigm until he saw the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Cornelius' home.

When the Gentile converts spoke in tongues, Peter unwittingly confirmed there was no gibberish. Peter said, "**They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.**" We know there was no unknown tongue spoken at Pentecost and there was no gibberish spoken at the home of Cornelius. I assume that Cornelius' family members and servants spoke among themselves in various dialects of the Roman language and this is what Peter and his friends observed.

Summary: Speaking in gibberish or an unknown tongue has no place in church or in the corporate worship of believers. The gift of speaking in tongues enabled the gospel to overcome the impossible barrier of language during the first century A.D. This genuine miracle, unlike gibberish, enables the gospel to go where it could not otherwise go! This genuine gift was bestowed upon early believers for the benefit of unbelievers. The result was rapid church growth.

Larry Wilson