

Speaking in Tongues

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By Gregory John Monroe



Before my conversion, there were times throughout the years that I'd feel a thirst and hunger in my soul for God. I never spoke to Him directly, but I'd go find some external source that I thought might shed some light on Him.

One of those times, after visiting and talking to some in the Baha'i and Unitarian/Universalist faiths, I sat down in the office of a Charismatic Christian. Describing his Christian experience, he brought up the topic of tongues.

After explaining to me that speaking in tongues is evidence that one has received the Holy Spirit, I asked if he could speak to me in tongues. He smiled and began to speak incomprehensible utterances. Afterwards, when asked what he had said, he said he didn't know. But he assured me that I could learn to speak, with practice, in the same way.

I left there unimpressed. That tongues could so automatically be spoken at will didn't sit right with me, though I didn't know why. After all, I didn't know anything about the topic. I wondered

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too that if tongues were a supernatural gift, how is it I had to learn it by practicing it. The experience with that guy just didn't feel right.

Biblical Descriptions

Over some twenty years later I came to Jesus. My Bible studies since have shown me a different picture than what was presented by my Charismatic advisor.

To begin with, the Bible shows that speaking in tongues is the ability to speak in another earthly language. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit." Matthew 28: 19.

In order for Jesus' command to be carried out, His disciples would have to be able to speak the different languages of the nations. At best, not being formally educated, they spoke only one or two languages.

"And these signs shall follow them that believe they shall speak with new tongues." Mark 16: 17. With this promise from Jesus, His disciples supernaturally were able to instantaneously speak foreign languages they did not know.

I find three instances of that taking place in the Bible.

1. Acts 2: 5-11 "Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred (the rushing wind in a house), the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them (the disciples) in his own language.

"They were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?...We hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.'"

This example shows the purpose that the gift of tongues was given at that time. It was to communicate to the festival-visiting Jews and proselytes. Through tongues, the gospel was broadcast to them in different existing languages from around the world.

Note that this wasn't a heavenly language only understood by God. Nor was an interpreter needed. In this chapter of Acts, both the disciples and the hearers understood what was being said, resulting in three-thousand being baptized into the faith that very day.

2. This supernatural example of speaking a foreign language, not known to the speaker, is found in Acts 10: 44-46. There, we find Peter preaching to Cornelius and his household. "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God."

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There were language barriers in this meeting. Cornelius was Italian, and history shows that during that time, the servants in a Roman house could be from anywhere in the world. Peter was a Jew and spoke Aramaic. So more than likely, Peter preached through an interpreter.

However, upon hearing the gospel from Peter, The Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household. They began to speak in tongues, exalting God. In other words, all of a sudden, they spoke in a language that they didn't formerly know. We know this because an interpreter wasn't involved, for it was reported that the Jews understood what they were saying.

3. Acts 19: 6. Paul came into contact with twelve disciples. "When Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying." For their prophesying (preaching) to be effective, it had to be understood in the languages that were common throughout the Roman Empire.

So what is learned from the three examples I've cited? (1) Evidence shows that the gift of tongues comes from the Holy Spirit. (2) Tongues is the ability to speak an earthly language that is foreign to the speaker. (3) The gift of tongues was given when language barriers existed. (4) When tongues were spoken, the speaker understood what was being said. (5) The listener heard in his or her own language. And (6) tongues were used to deliver the gospel, and to praise God for it.

It appears that the Holy Spirit's overall purpose for bestowing the gift of tongues is to give the speaker the power for preaching. After all, Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." Acts 1: 8.

Uttering babbling sounds that no one understands, as is the case associated with modern "tongues," doesn't and can't push forward Jesus' agenda for us. For sure, such unintelligible chatter isn't in agreement with the Holy Spirit's doings we read about in the Bible.

Speaking in God's House

Watching Christian television, every now and then a preacher will insert in his or her message a breakout of what's supposed to be tongues. Other times, the congregation is encouraged to all pray at once in tongues.

Apparently, the Corinthian church in the Apostle Paul's day did the same speaking languages unknown to others present. It was chaotic and confusing. And the Apostle Paul spoke against it throughout 1 Corinthians, chapter 14.

God is a God of order. Inspired by God, Paul instructed the church that if a tongue is about to be spoken that's unknown to the majority; the person should remain silent, unless someone is present to interpret. If not, let the communication silently be between that person and God (verse 28). In this way, a person speaks and is engaged in the mysteries of God (verse 2).

Furthermore, Paul teaches that tongues are meant to be a sign to the unbeliever (1 Cor. 14:22). In other words, when the unbelieving listener discovers that the speaker unknowingly

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spoke the listener's language, the listener cannot escape the fact that a miracle has taken place.

However, if the whole church is speaking tongues at once, an entering unbeliever (or TV viewer) will think of the place as a lunatic asylum.

Overall, the main point Paul makes in chapter 14 is that the purpose of speaking in tongues is for the edification of the church in an orderly manner. In order for the listener to learn, the language must be understood. Otherwise, tongues amount to nothing (verse 9).

Tongues Aren't the Only Gift

Sadly, though, some modern-day Christians dismiss the biblical way and insist on doing things their way. By doing so, it's my opinion that they have allowed themselves to be deceived. So much so, that they believe speaking in tongues is the sole piece of evidence that one has received and been baptized by the Holy Spirit.

This too goes against scripture. 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11 plainly states that there are many gifts, and that they come from the Holy Spirit, who in turn distributes those gifts to us as He sees fit. We all don't have the same gifts.

Some of the gifts are more important than others, but when listed by the Bible, tongues are at the bottom of the list (1 Cor. 12: 28). In fact, Paul says greater is he that prophesies than he who speaks with tongues (1 Cor. 14: 5).

Tongues Today

There is something even more troubling, though, about some people in modern Christianity. It is the seeming lack of genuineness with their "tongues." That the Christians in Paul's time spoke real world languages, I've no doubt. Paul, well educated, spoke many languages (1 Cor. 14: 18). He recognized the legitimacy of their tongue speaking. If it were otherwise, he would have called them out for speaking gibberish.

Since today's tongues in the Charismatic community doesn't seem to be communicating the gospel, edifying the church, nor respecting biblical church conduct, I'm inclined to suspect that what's going on isn't for real.

Buttressing this suspicion are the documentaries I've seen or heard about. For instance, Native Americans in New Mexico, after eating hallucinogenic peyote and listening to pounding drums, chant and make murmuring and mumbling sounds that are the same as today's so-called tongues.

Then there were the tribes in Africa. After making animal sacrifices, they would dance to their drum beats and begin to chant. Eventually they'd become possessed by their gods and begin to make other-worldly noises. Again they are the same kind of sounds generated in today's tongues.

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History then tells us about the African slaves brought to America and forced to accept Christianity. Not being able to read the Bible themselves, they mistakenly associated their spirit dances featuring the mutterings of a spirit-possessed person with the Christian gift of tongues. This caught on in the South and the participants through the years eventually came to be known as Holy Rollers.

The practice expanded nationally among Caucasians in the Pentecostal movement. It got its start in 1906 in a famously known Los Angeles location named Azusa Street. The leader of the church was a black man, William Seymour, a former holiness preacher.

In the 1960's, the Charismatic movement began attracting believers in the mainline denominations. Today, there are millions of charismatics in both Protestant and Catholic churches all over the world.

In all these scenarios, a common denominator is an emotional atmosphere accompanied by rhythmic music. In all these cases, the babbling sounds the same.

Some will dispute my suggestion that most tongue speaking in the church is false. After all, they themselves have been involved in the ecstatic tongue speaking experience for years. I've no doubt it feels real to them. But conclusions shouldn't be based on feelings. Feelings can be deceptive.

The devil, every chance he gets, counterfeits the things of God in order to direct worship towards himself. With the right atmosphere, it is a no-brainer that he, a master, can manipulate one into feeling that counterfeit tongues are real.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying the gift of tongues in our modern times isn't real. I know of cases from recent years in which listeners have heard their language spoken by someone who doesn't know the language.

What I am saying is that if tongues spoken doesn't line up with biblical teachings, one should consider that the catalyst for such speaking isn't the Holy Spirit, but is an unholy spirit dressed in righteousness.

Restoring biblical truth is a passion of Gregory John Monroe. Read his other articles that return the Word of God to its original meaning and intent. Provocative and controversial, he spurs you

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to seek the truth. Go to his blog My Christian Mind right now at <http://www.tinyurl.com/6tql5yj>

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