

Why We Don't Speak in Tongues

Speaking in Tongues is a fast growing aspect of religion and denominations today. Before the 1900s, almost no one claimed to speak in tongues (in the manner that many see today). Even the Pentecostal churches themselves (where modern tongue speaking originates) only identifies seven instances of speaking in tongues between the first century and 1901, and these are highly questionable. Modern speaking in tongues began to rise in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and usually refers to speaking in a language unknown by men (some would say a "tongue of angels"), that sounds to the hearer as an unintelligible "gibberish" or baby talk. Studies of speaking in tongues (called *glossolalia*) by linguists have confirmed that it lacks any indication (neither in vocabulary nor grammar) of being any kind of language¹.

After 1901 (the beginning of the modern Pentecostal movement), many churches have begun to claim that speaking in tongues is a major part of their spiritual life. In the last few years churches that did not practice this have begun to accept and allow it in their worship. Some churches claim that speaking in tongues is a necessary sign of salvation (contrary to the teaching of the Bible in 1 Cor. 12:7-11, 29-30). Others claim that prayers need to be made in tongues so that Satan is unable to understand (a teaching completely absent from scriptures). Today, *speaking in tongues* refers to speaking in an unintelligible muttering that is not a language known in the world. We will come to understand that the unintelligible nature of speaking in tongues is ONLY a modern understanding; in the New Testament, *Speaking in Tongues* has a different meaning.

Why is it that we do not speak in tongues, and believe that no one else does either?

1. Modern speaking in tongues is unscriptural: Speaking in tongues was introduced for the first time in Acts 2. There we read the following: "*And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance*" (Acts 2:4). This statement makes it clear that speaking in tongues was speaking in a foreign language. If it is not clear here, it is clear subsequently: "*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'*" (Acts 2:7-8). When we see tongues again mentioned in Acts 10:46-47, we are told that this is the same phenomenon as in Acts 2. These are the only two examples of speaking in tongues in the scriptures, and they both reveal that speaking in tongues means speaking in foreign languages. Even when Paul instructs the church on how to properly use these gifts in worship in 1 Corinthians 14, it still reveals that these gifts are foreign languages. Therefore,

¹ Samarin, W J (1968) the Linguisticity of Glossolalia. Hartford Quarterly, 8, 49-75; Samarin's extensive study of glossolalia leads him to conclude that "*in spite of superficial similarities, glossolalia fundamentally is not language*" (Samarin 1972). He characterized it as: "...strings of meaningless syllables made up of sounds taken from those familiar to the speaker and put together more or less haphazardly. Glossolalia is language-like because the speaker unconsciously wants it to be language-like." (quoted in Nickell, 1993: 108)

scriptural speaking in tongues is not unintelligible speech, but a miraculous ability to speak in a known foreign language.

Early writers after the end of the first century also confirm that this was the nature of speaking in tongues. Irenaeus (115-202) records this to be the case from his knowledge of the time. Cyril of Alexandria (c. 400AD) did not claim to have direct understanding, but tells us that the common interpretation of speaking in tongues in the New Testament was speaking in foreign languages. Indeed, until the 18th century, speaking in tongues was commonly understood as such; it is ONLY A MODERN AMERICAN MOVEMENT that speaking in tongues is speaking a language not known to men. Therefore, modern speaking in tongues is a practice not known to the scriptures; it is by definition unscriptural. We reject those things that are an addition to the word of God (Revelation 22:18-19).

What about 1 Corinthians 13:1? Some point to Paul's statement "*though I speak in the tongues of angels*" as a testimony of the ability of one to speak in languages that belong to angels, and not men. However, most fail to read further in the same passage where Paul also compares spiritual knowledge with "*knowing ALL mysteries*" and faith with "*removing mountains*", both things which clearly are not literal points. In other words, Paul's statements are hyperbole, an exaggeration of the example to make a point. Paul's point was that without love, even an extreme (and non-existent) manifestation of the gift was meaningless (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Making Paul's hyperbole into a literal truth when the remainder of the context says otherwise is a deliberate attempt to create an interpretation to fit our pre-existing idea. It is a sin to take scripture out of context for our own justification (2 Peter 1:20-21).

2. Modern speaking in tongues is worldly: In the New Testament, the word "worldly" is used with several other words to describe those things that come from worldly sources. In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul uses words such as "carnal" and "natural" to describe things that are not from God (which he calls "*spiritual*"). Later in James 3:15 James adds the terms "*earthly*" and "*demonic*" to describe worldly things. If something does not come from the Spirit (meaning it is revealed by the Word of God, John 6:63), then it is a carnal revelation. We have already seen that modern speaking in tongues is not Scriptural; thus, it is a worldly practice.

One of the characteristics of carnality is that it glorifies men and not God, it causes divisions, and increases vain glory (1 Corinthians 3:3). Consider modern speaking in tongues: today, when men boast of the ability to speak in tongues, are they not doing so because it brings them an appearance of spiritual superiority? In the New Testament, true speaking in tongues was not something given to all Christians (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). If today men use it as a testimony of their salvation, they are sinning, as the only testimony of our salvation is what is written (1 John 5:13), which is why the testimony of salvation is by faith (Romans 10:9 and James 2:26). They are trying to create a physical manifestation of salvation rather than to accept the spiritual evidence

of salvation (faith which comes by hearing the word of God and is established by obedience to the word of God).

Today, speaking in tongues has become a matter of glory and honor to many. They make a point of putting it on their websites, or of telling others of their secret prayers in tongues. Some churches offer classes to teach others how to do this (a practice unheard of in the New Testament). Yet they fail to realize that in doing so they are making carnal what they think is spiritual. While we have seen that modern speaking in tongues is not the same as biblical speaking in tongues, even if it were, the obsession and braggadocio by most would make it something that we ought not to seek after. This seems to be Paul's point to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14:17-19.

3. Modern speaking in tongues is unnecessary: The miraculous spiritual gifts of the first century were given with one purpose: to confirm the message being preached by the Apostles. *"How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will"* (Hebrews 2:3-4; Mark 16:20, Acts 2:22, Romans 15:18-19, 1 Corinthians 2:4, etc.). The miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, of which tongues is one, were to demonstrate that those who spoke did so by the will of God. They were not to glorify men or to establish the faith of men (again, Romans 10:9 teaches us that scriptures do this work). Biblical speaking in tongues had one purpose: to prove that the men who composed the New Testament did so with God's permission. Even Jesus testified that this was why He worked miracles (Mark 2:9).

It is important to know that New Testament writers made it clear that their message was finite; it would be completed in their lifetimes, and all of the miraculous gifts would no longer be needed. Peter said at the end of his life that *"His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of" Jesus (2 Peter 1:3)*. Jude said that our faith has been *"once and for all handed down"* (Jude 3). Perhaps most effectively Paul said, at the end of his life, that *"all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work"* (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Paul's clear statement left no room for anything else to be needed. In other words, if we are thoroughly equipped with the scriptures, why would we need the gift of tongues? If we are made complete by scriptures, what need of there is the gift of tongues? If scriptures prepare us for every good work, what works remain that we need something else to prepare us? The answer is clear: there is no need for this gift. It was necessary to confirm the Word as it was being given, but once finished, it was no longer necessary.

If this point is not clear, it is made clear through what Paul told the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 he says *“love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away”*. Paul states that tongues would cease when the perfect had come. That which is perfect is the scriptures; indeed, the same term describes what the scriptures accomplish within the man of God in the passage before (2 Timothy 3:17): perfection. Here is a direct statement by an apostle that the gift of tongues is going to cease, and a clear timeframe when it would happen.

4. Modern speaking in tongues may be demonic: If we are to understand that modern speaking in tongues is not from scriptures, that it contradicts scriptures, and it is in fact a worldly or carnal practice, another frightening possibility emerges. *“The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie”* (2 Thessalonians 2:9-11). Here Paul speaks of the apostasy of believers, one often discussed in scriptures. We are told that those who lead this falling away will come do so through power, signs and wonders performed by the working of Satan. We are also told that God will send/permit a strong delusion to come to those in error. All of this is because there are those who do not love the word (manifested as the scriptures, the Word of God).

We now know that the scriptures reveal that modern speaking in tongues is not the same as the early Christian gift of the Holy Spirit; we know that scriptures reveal that a spiritual gift cannot be used to verify our salvation; we know scriptures reveal that these gifts were meant to end when the New Testament was completed. With this in mind we should conclude that anyone who practices modern speaking in tongues does so in opposition to the truth; they have a distinct and demonstrable lack of love for the truth. It is these (those who have no love of the truth) that we are told will be deluded by the workings of Satan by signs.

It is not clear how people who speak in tongues do so; there are several likely explanation. First, many have admitted to making up the experience of speaking in tongues to “fit in”². Still others may be working themselves into this behavior unwittingly by characteristics similar to the descriptions of somatic disorders (sometimes called *hysteria* or *group hysteria*). Consider that it is not just modern denominations that practice this behavior; non-Christian communities all over the world have similar practices, indicating it has nothing to do with Christian faith³. But the most

² Spanos, Nicholas P.; Cross, Wendy P.; Lepage, Mark; Coristine, Marjorie (February 1986). “Glossolalia as learned behavior: An experimental demonstration”. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 95

³ Goodman, Felicitas D. (1972). *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study in Glossolalia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

disturbing possibility is for those who have not made up the ability nor have merely worked themselves into hysteria: this is a sign from Satan.

Many immediately deny the possibility of a Satanic source of moderns speaking in tongues, but they do so to the ignorance of scriptures. Many refuse to even consider that what they see as a gift may be quite the opposite. Yet scriptures reveal that Satan disguises himself as an *“angel of light”* (2 Corinthians 11:14). We are told that we must consider all gifts and messages as potentially counterfeit (Galatians 1:8-9), and to test these things (1 John 4:1) against the scriptures. Yet too many accept speaking in tongues without that important test, and may be misled by Satan himself.

(For clarity, we need to understand that an idea or practice being demonically inspired is not the same as a person being possessed by demons. We know that demonic possession occurred in the New Testament time, but there is no evidence that it occurred elsewhere before or afterwards. We are warned of the *“doctrines of demons”* (1 Timothy 4:1), and that behind false idols are demons (1 Corinthians 10:20); this is not warning us of demonic possession, but demonic ideas. A satanic or demonic sign may speak more to the idea of a real sign with carnal or worldly implications. We have said that modern speaking in tongues *may be* a Satanic sign since Scriptures are not entirely clear on how Satan works through signs; however, there is no question that it is clear that he does.)

5. None of us speak in tongues: There is a curious truth many who speak in tongues do not consider: in churches where tongues are NOT identified as a gift today, NO ONE speaks in tongues. At first that might seem natural, but consider now that the Bible says that there is only One Spirit (Ephesians 4:4). In other words, does it make sense that the Holy Spirit imparts the gift of tongues to some (in abundance), but not at all to others? Does this idea not contradict the scriptures which say *“there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons; but to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”* (1 Corinthians 12:6-7)? In the churches of Christ in the United States, it is unknown for speaking in tongues by church leaders or worship leaders to occur. Has no one stop to ask why?

Some might claim that the Spirit simply has not come upon those who do not believe in tongues, but at the same time they claim that speaking in tongues is an uncontrollable gift. It came on Cornelius before he was a Christian (Acts 10:44-48), so why not on sincere Bible believing Christians today in churches of Christ? Some might say that this means that members of the church of Christ are therefore unbelievers; yet the gift of tongues were given to convict unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:22 *“tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers”*). So whether it is unbelief or the absence of faith altogether, if scriptural speaking in tongues was still present, it should be present in churches where it is not taught as abundantly as where it is taught. Indeed, one would think that, being a gift to those who do believe, it would

be more abundant in such churches. It is not. This problem has two possible answers: modern speaking in tongues is not a gift of the Holy Spirit, or there is more than one Holy Spirit.

Conclusion: We do not speak in tongues, and we do not anticipate doing so. Scriptures reveal the nature of this gift, and what is today occurring is not that gift. Scriptures reveal the purpose and intent of the first century gift, and that purpose has been accomplished. Scriptures teach us that this gift would pass away, and we believe that the scriptures are true. Finally, scriptures reveal that when men do not love the truth of the scriptures, that God permits Satan to deceive them, and that modern speaking in tongues fits perfectly the type of deception described in scriptures.