

COMMON QUESTION NO. 7

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS TONGUES-SPEAKING TODAY?

There is a lot of excitement over the subject of tongues in the church of today. Many consider that speaking in tongues is the necessary evidence that a person has received the Holy Spirit. Throughout the world worship services take place where the whole congregation supposedly erupts into tongues-speaking. Countless individual Christians claim to pray in tongues in private. For so many, such experience is enough, it is proof that the gift of tongues is alive and well, and even to question it is branded as unbelief. May I urge you never to make experience your final authority, but only the Scriptures. References to tongues in the Bible are found in Mark 16:17, Acts 2:3-4,11, 10:46, 19:6, 1 Corinthians 12:10,28,30, 13:1,8, 14:5-6,18,21-23,39, and we shall be considering these passages.

1. We must first consider what these 'tongues' are. Tongues is a spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 12:10). One speaking in a tongue is, by the power of the Holy Spirit, speaking a real language on earth but one previously unknown to the speaker. This is obviously what took place on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:7-11). The tongues in the Corinthians church also seem to be such real human languages, because in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul uses the very example of languages (v. 10), notes the tongues should be interpreted like any language (v. 13), and uses an example taken from the Old Testament (v. 21) which refers to a real language, that of the Babylonians. Someone asks: What about the "tongues of ... angels" (1 Corinthians 13:1)? In the context Paul is imagining the very highest possible tongues (whether or not existing) and teaching that even that would be just an empty noise if there is no love.

2. Tongues interpreted is equivalent to prophecy. In 1 Corinthians 14:2-5 Paul compares tongues with prophecy. If tongues is not interpreted then it benefits no one, even though "mysteries in the Spirit" have been uttered (v. 2). For Paul, the word "mystery" uniformly means someone that cannot be known unless it is revealed (see 1 Corinthians 15:51). Tongues is therefore a revelation from God, so that when interpreted, it is equal to a prophecy (v. 5). It is so important to understand that tongues is direct revelation from God, just as the written Scriptures are! If it is a direct gift of the Holy Spirit how could it be anything else?

3. Why did God give this peculiar gift? Why go to the trouble of getting someone to speak in a language that a person does not know and then to get it translated so that the hearers can understand? 1 Corinthians 14:20-22 give the Biblical answer. There is an appeal to the "law", the Old Testament, as it continues to have authority over Christian believers. In Isaiah 28:11-12 God tells the Israelites that, because they have refused to hear His prophets who spoke their own language, He will bring them into judgement through a people (the Assyrians) who speak a language they do not understand. This is one of the covenant curses (Deuteronomy 28:49, see Jeremiah 5:15). When God speaks to His people in this way it is in judgement. Therefore, tongues had two purposes: (1) God is judging His people the Jews, who have refused to listen to the great Prophet (Christ), and is taking away the kingdom from them (Matthew 21:43). (2) At the same time that God is turning away from the Jews, He is turning to all the nations of the world by using their own languages, as at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11).

4. Tongues are not needed today. Although we cannot rule out exceptions, the purpose for which this gift was given has been fulfilled. Tongues are a direct revelation from God (like a prophecy), in a real foreign language. We have learned that they were a sign of judgment upon the unbelieving Jews. So consider this illustration. The driver of a vehicle wants to turn

left and he puts on his indicator. After he has made the turn he switches the indicator off, for there is no more purpose in it flashing. It is the same with tongues. Once the kingdom was taken away from the Jews and there was no more danger of the church being Jewish (see Acts 15), then tongues had already served its purpose. Also remember that direct revelation from God has been completed through the apostles (Eph.2:20). If you think this conclusion is ridiculous because there are those who claim to speak in tongues today, you must ask this question: "Have such claims been tested so that it has been proved that real foreign languages were spoken?" If not, how can you be sure that such are genuine gift of tongues according to the Bible.

5. But someone objects that every Christian should speak in tongues at least once as the evidence of having been baptized in the Spirit. This is a common teaching, but it is not true.

- Every Christian has been baptized in the Spirit at conversion. This is what united every single true Christian (1 Corinthians 12:13). Pentecost was not a second blessing for the apostles. For the first time they were receiving the great gift of the new covenant established through Christ's death and as a result of His resurrection (Acts 2:33). John the Baptist declared that this is the very reason why Jesus came (see Matthew 3:11 and parallels).
- Not everyone spoke in tongues in Acts. There are only three clear occasions (Acts 2:4, 10:46, 19:6), possible a fourth (Acts 8:17). Significantly, each one marks a turning point, the Jews, the Samaritans, the Gentiles, and finally the disciples of John, becoming Christians. The evidence of having been baptized in the Spirit (or having received the Spirit, or being true sons of God) is not speaking in tongues but putting "to death the deeds of the body", and having assurance that we are sons of God (Romans 8:13-17). Note what Paul considers is the evidence of being "filled with the Spirit", and it is not tongues (Ephesians 5:18-21).
- Tongues is only one gift of the Spirit, given as He wills (12:11). The question, "Do all speak in tongues?" demands a denial (12:30). Tongues was downplayed by Paul in Corinthians. It comes at the end of the lists in 12:8-10, 29-30, 14:26; it is not one of the "higher gifts". Prophecy is to be much more desired in the church (14:1). He calls the attitude of the Corinthians towards tongues 'childish' (14:20).
- If Mark 16:17 is insisted upon, then ALL believers MUST also "cast out demons ... pick up serpents ..." etc. "Those who believe" are best seen as the apostles who were displaying such unbelief (vv. 11,13,14). Truly these signs did follow them.
- Also consider 1 Corinthians 13:8. If "the perfect" (v. 10) refers to the completed Scriptures, then tongues as revelation (together with prophecy) were destined to pass away when the canon of Scripture was completed. Historically this is what happened. As tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy, then such tongues are the foundation of the church which has been laid and completed (Ephesians 2:20).

6. The modern phenomena called 'tongues' is rarely (if ever) the Biblical tongues. It is not a known language; little attempt is made to interpret (as directed in 1 Corinthians 14:27-28); it is mostly private yet as with all spiritual gifts it was not given not for personal benefit (see 1 Corinthians 12:7).