

Is Speaking in Tongues for Today?

"Speaking in tongues"! Just utter that phrase among Christians, and you elicit a wide variety of reactions, sometimes very strong reactions. Bible studies by the thousands have been written for it ... and against it. Many ask a legitimate question: "Is speaking in tongues for today?"

Historically, speaking in a tongue (*glossolalia*) by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was common among Christians in the first-century Church, then seemed to fade out gradually in succeeding centuries. In the very early twentieth century there came a resurgence of this biblical practice, most notably in Topeka, Kansas, and in revival meetings on Azusa Street in Los Angeles.

From those and other places of spiritual renewal came many of today's leading Pentecostal denominations. Subsequent movements in which speaking in tongues was a prominent feature included the Latter Rain revival, the mid-20th-century healing ministries, the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship, and the Charismatic Renewal. In this latter movement especially, the biblical doctrine of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues, spread broadly into both the Roman Catholic Church and many Protestant denominations.

By the early 21st century, speaking in tongues (the theological term is *glossolalia*) — that is, languages unknown to the speaker, given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit — had become broadly if not universally accepted within worldwide Christianity. Many portions of the worldwide Church today have once again come to embrace one of the historical ancient landmarks of the Church that Jesus created.

But historical and anecdotal testimonies, as interesting as they may be, are still secondary. The Bible must be the source of primary importance in establishing the present-day validity of speaking in tongues. So to that treasure trove, the Bible, we will now turn to answer the question: **"Why should we speak in tongues?"**

*Mark 16:15-17 He [Jesus] said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those **who believe**: In my name they will drive out demons; they will **speak in new tongues**.*

The verses above are from Mark's account of Jesus' Great Commission. It was Jesus Himself who initiated the subject of speaking in tongues in the New Testament. He said that it would be a "sign" that would accompany believers as they went into all the world and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

• **So our first reply to the question "Why speak in tongues?" is that Jesus endorsed the practice.** In fact, Jesus said that speaking in tongues is one of the signs that *"will accompany those who believe."*

At this point, it will be helpful to examine several portions of Scripture in the book of Acts (see the three quotes below) that speak of being “baptized with” or “filled with” the Holy Spirit. As we will see, on all three occasions believers who were said to be filled/baptized with the Spirit **immediately spoke in tongues**. This is the biblical pattern. When believers are baptized with the Holy Spirit, they begin to speak in tongues.

*Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-4, KJV And, being assembled together with them, [Jesus] commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but **ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost** not many days hence.... [2:1] And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were **all filled with the Holy Ghost**, and began to **speak with other tongues**, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

The sound of a mighty wind ... tongues of fire ... all 120 speaking in tongues! This was the first New Testament day of Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection. He had prophesied to His followers that they would be “*baptized with the Holy Ghost*” (1:5). This occurred some few days later on “*the day of Pentecost*” (2:1), when it is said that “*they were all filled with the Holy Ghost*” (2:4) and manifested this by the evidence of speaking in tongues (2:4). As a point of interest, because this happened on “*the day of Pentecost*” (2:1), those who have received this baptism with the Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in tongues, have often in modern times been called “Pentecostals”.

Compare verses 1:5 and 2:4. We see that the Bible uses the terms “*baptized with the Holy Ghost*” and “*filled with the Holy Ghost*” as synonyms for the **same** biblical experience. And the discernible evidence of that baptism with the Holy Spirit was their speaking in tongues. This same evidence will be seen again in Acts, chapters 10 and 19 (below).

But before looking at Acts 10, let’s take one more look at Acts 1:5 (KJV) — “*John truly baptized with **water**; but **ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost** not many days hence.*” Jesus made a clear **distinction** between water baptism and baptism with the Holy Spirit. They are not one and the same. Now on to Acts, chapter 10.

*Acts 10:44-47 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 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. **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 Holy Spirit just as we have.**”*

Some Gentiles had assembled in Cornelius’s house to hear Peter preach. While Peter was still speaking, the listeners received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues. And how did Peter and his companions know that they had received “*the gift of the Holy Spirit*”? The answer is in verse 46: “**For they heard them speaking in tongues.**” Again, as in Acts 2, the evidence of their having received the gift of the Holy Spirit was their speaking in tongues.

In Act 1 and 2 we saw the first group in Jerusalem being "*baptized with ... filled with the Holy Spirit.*" Peter certified that these Gentiles in Acts 10 had received the **identical** experience — "***They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.***" So Acts 2, the first New Testament day of Pentecost, was not a one-time occurrence. To the contrary, Peter asserts that these Gentiles had received the identical gift of the Holy Spirit.

Peter recounts this again in Acts 11:15-17 — "*As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?*" The Gentiles in Acts 10 received the "*same gift,*" the same baptism with the Holy Spirit, that the 120 had received in Jerusalem (in Acts 2). And in both instances they manifested the **identical evidence** — they immediately spoke in **tongues**.

And notice once more (vss. 10:47-48 above) that Peter made a clear distinction between water baptism and their having received the Holy Spirit.

*Acts 19:1-6 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.***

Here is a third clear instance in the book of Acts — along with Acts 2 and Acts 10 just studied above — where believers received the **baptism with the Spirit and spoke in tongues**. So we have a consistent bible pattern — believers who are baptized with/filled with the Holy Spirit will immediately speak in tongues.

● **These three clear instances in Acts 2, 10, and 19 illustrate that speaking in tongues is the Scriptural evidence of the baptism with the Holy Spirit.**

Acts 19:1-6 (quoted just above) brings us another important insight. Notice that the apostle Paul considered these believers to be baptized disciples. Paul's question establishes the fact that **it is perfectly appropriate to ask a water-baptized Christian, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"** There is a clear difference between being "***born of the Spirit***" (John 3:5) and "***baptized with the Holy Spirit.***" They are entirely different Greek words. The context — they spoke in tongues in verse 6 — shows that Paul's question "***Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?***" was asked in the sense of "Have you water-baptized disciples been baptized with the Holy Spirit yet?" That is a valid question to ask any believer.

In sum, our Scripture texts in Acts 2, 10, and 19 reveal a consistent pattern:

- **There is a baptism in water, and there is a distinct baptism in the Holy Spirit.**
- **Those who receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit give evidence to this by speaking in tongues.**

*Acts 2:4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other **tongues** as the **Spirit enabled** them.*

KJV: ...as the Spirit gave them utterance.

- **Why speak in tongues? — It gives us an ever-present opportunity to submit to the leading, the direction, the enablement of the Holy Spirit.** We do the speaking, but the **Holy Spirit** actually **enables** us to do so by prompting us with the words to speak in a language not known to us. This humble, willing submission of our vocal organs to the Holy Spirit's leading will stand us in good stead as we open ourselves to other facets of the Holy Spirit's direction and guidance and to His spiritual gifts.

*Acts 11:15-18, KJV And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as **God gave them the like gift as he did unto us**, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God? When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.*

- **Why speak in tongues? — It demonstrates the reality of God in the life of the one speaking in tongues.** At this early stage of the New Testament Church, the original Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were still doubtful that the Gospel should even be preached to the Gentiles! Peter corrected their error by telling the account of his preaching to the Gentiles at Cornelius's house, and of those Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. This dramatic event **convinced the skeptics** in Jerusalem, and they acknowledged that God had indeed "*granted repentance unto life*" (18) to the Gentiles. The fact that the Gentiles spoke with tongues was **sufficient evidence** for the Jewish Christians to discard centuries of anti-Gentile sentiment and to embrace them as fellow Christians.

*Acts 19:2a, 6 [Paul] asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" ... [6] When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in **tongues and prophesied**.*

• **The baptism with the Holy Spirit opens the door to other spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit** — here, “they...prophesied.”

Jesus Himself was **conceived** by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20). But at about age 30 at River Jordan, Jesus was **anointed** and empowered by the Holy Spirit (John 1:32-33 with Acts 10:38). **Only after** this distinct experience of the Spirit did Jesus do his **first miracle**, at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2:11).

It is the Holy Spirit anointing, which comes in the baptism with the Spirit, that tends to release in the recipients a greater flow in the gifts of the Spirit.

*1 Corinthians 12:7, 10 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given **for the common good**... [10] 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**.*

• **The companion gifts of the Spirit — tongues and interpretation of tongues — are manifested in church services “for the [church’s] common good.”** We will look at the subject of tongues in church services in greater depth in chapter 14 of this epistle (below).

*1 Corinthians 14:2 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.*

There is an ability to speak in tongues (*glossolalia*) that is given to all who receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as shown in our earlier discussions of Acts chapters 2, 10, and 19. 1 Corinthians 14:2 gives us an additional reason why Spirit-baptized believers should speak in tongues — “Anyone who speaks in a tongue ... **speak[s] ... to God.**”

• **That is, speaking in tongues is a God-given way for believers to “speak to God.”** As such, it is a valuable asset in our prayer life, along with speaking to God in our own native language (which is English for me).

*1 Corinthians 14:2, 14-15a For anyone who speaks in a tongue ... utters mysteries **with his spirit** [KJV: ‘**in the spirit**’].... [14] For if I pray in a tongue, **my spirit prays**, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind.*

• **Praying in tongues is praying “in” or “with the spirit.”** There is a praying in the known language, comprehended by our minds. And there is also a “praying in the spirit” — that is, praying in tongues — inspired by the Holy Spirit and not understood by our minds.

*1 Corinthians 14:4 He who speaks in a tongue **edifies himself**, but he who prophesies edifies the church.*

• **Why speak in tongues? — The one speaking in tongues is edified, built up.**

Some have wrongly read this as Paul minimizing the importance of tongues. But Paul is making two positive comments here: (1) speaking in tongues edifies the individual, and (2) prophecy spoken in the church edifies the church. It is a good thing for *both* individuals and the church to be edified.

*1 Corinthians 14:5a, 39 I would **like every one of you to speak in tongues**.... [39] Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and **do not forbid speaking in tongues**.*

• **Why speak in tongues? — The great apostle Paul spoke very favorably of the practice: "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues."** Even further, Paul gave an admonition that, sadly, is disobeyed in many churches of our day: "**Do not forbid speaking in tongues**." Yet many pastors in our day do exactly this, contradicting the Scriptures by telling their congregations that tongues are not for them or not for this day and age.

*1 Corinthians 14:5, 12-13 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who **prophesies is greater** than one who speaks in **tongues, unless he interprets**, so that the **church may be edified**.... [12] So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that **build up the church**. For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says.*

• **Why speak in tongues? — The spiritual gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:10), when coupled with the companion spiritual gift of interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:10), edifies and builds up the church.**

On many occasions and in various congregations I have heard someone bring forth a message in tongues in church. This was followed by the gift of interpretation. And the net result in each case was that the people present were edified and built up.

In the Scripture just above, the apostle Paul declares that "*He who prophesies is **greater** than one who speaks in tongues, **unless he interprets***." So if there is a tongue with interpretation, Paul is saying that the value is roughly **equivalent** to prophecy.

1 Corinthians 14:14-15, KJV For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is it then? **I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.**

• **Why speak in tongues? — It helps us to have a balanced prayer life and a balanced worship experience.** Paul endorses both "pray[ing] with the **spirit and ... pray[ing] with the understanding.**" Interestingly, in this direct context of tongues, the apostle also encourages singing with both the spirit and the understanding.

1 Corinthians 14:16-17 If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be **giving thanks** well enough, but the other man is not edified.

• **Why speak in tongues? — When speaking in tongues, "you may be giving thanks well."** As we have seen (Acts 2:4), tongues are a language inspired by the Holy Spirit. The speaker does not know the content of what is being spoken. But God does! And the Spirit of God can inspire a wide variety of content in the tongue spoken — including "giving thanks well."

1 Corinthians 14:18 I thank God that **I speak in tongues more** than all of you.

• **Why speak in tongues? — It was apostolic practice.** Paul spoke in tongues. On the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), the original apostles of Jesus (less the traitor Judas, Acts 1:13-15) were part of the group that received the first outpouring of the Spirit, with the immediate evidence of speaking in tongues.

Paul **thanked** God for the God-given ability to speak in tongues. And he desired the same experience for all believers — (14:5) "I would like **every one of you** to speak in tongues."

1 Corinthians 14:26 What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a **hymn**, or a **word of instruction**, a **revelation**, a **tongue** or an **interpretation**. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

• **Why speak in tongues? — Tongues with interpretation are an appropriate part of an edifying New Testament church service.** Verse 26 lists the most important parts of a church service — **praise/worship** ("a hymn"), the ministry of the **word** ("a word of instruction"), and the **gifts of the Spirit** ("a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation").

And Paul declares that *"all of these must be done for the strengthening of the church."* Sadly, in our day the typical church accepts *some* of these — praise/worship and the ministry of the word — and rejects the various gifts of the Spirit, including tongues and interpretation. If we want "strengthened" churches, we will include the **word, worship, and gifts of the Spirit** in our church services.

In conclusion, it will be informative to see that there are a variety of manifestations of tongues in the bible. Remember that, although the language may or may not be understood by listeners, in all instances recorded in Scripture, the tongue being spoken was **supernaturally given** to the speaker by the Holy Spirit and was **not understood by the one speaking**. Listed below are a variety of bible terms for the practice of *glossolalia*, or speaking in tongues:

- "**new** tongues" (Mark 16:17)
 - "**other** tongues" (Acts 2:4)
 - "**different kinds** of tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:10, 28)
 - "**diversities** of tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:28, KJV)
 - "**tongues of men and of angels**" (1 Corinthians 13:1), that is, human languages and angelic, heavenly languages ("tongues of angels")
 - **unknown** tongues — "*an unknown tongue ... no man understandeth*" (1 Corinthians 14:2, KJV)
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To summarize, why then should we encourage speaking in tongues today, in the 21st century?

- **Jesus said** that believers would speak in tongues (Mark 16:17).
- Tongues certify and give **evidence** that the person is **baptized with the Holy Spirit** (Acts 1:5; 2:1-4; 10:44-46; 11:15-17; 19:1-6).
- Speaking in tongues is a good opportunity to submit to the Holy Spirit's **leading** (Acts 2:4).
- Tongues demonstrate the **reality of God** in the speaker's life (Acts 11:15-18).
- The baptism with the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, opens the **door to other gifts** of the Spirit (Acts 19:2,6).
- Tongues with interpretation are "*for the [church's] common good*" (1 Corinthians 12:7, 10).

- Speaking in tongues is speaking **to God** (1 Corinthians 14:2a).
- Praying in tongues is praying "*in*" or "*with the **spirit***" (1 Corinthians 14:2, 14-15).
- The speaker in tongues is **edified** (1 Corinthians 14:4).
- The apostle Paul expressly **approved** of tongues (1 Corinthians 14:5a, 39).
- A tongue followed by an **interpretation edifies** the church (1 Corinthians 14:5, 12-13).
- Tongues allow us a **balanced** prayer and worship life, both with the spirit and with the understanding (1 Corinthians 14:14-15).
- When speaking in tongues, you may be giving **thanks well** to God (1 Corinthians 14:16-17).
- Speaking in tongues was **apostolic practice** (1 Corinthians 14:18 and at Pentecost).
- Tongues with interpretation are an appropriate, strengthening part of an **edifying church service** (1 Corinthians 14:26).

In closing, I mention the often-asked question: "Is speaking in tongues biblical?" The bible itself answers that clearly. Jesus Himself, in Mark 16:17, said that speaking in tongues would characterize Great Commission believers. And more than 15 other New Testament verses refer to speaking in tongues in a favorable light. From the bottom of my heart I commend to you the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:5:

"I would like every one of you to speak in tongues."

Source: Pastor Jim Feeney PhD

<http://www.jimfeeney.org/speakingintongues.html>