

What Is Speaking In Tongues?

Bible Answers About Miracles

Speaking in tongues is not mentioned often in the New Testament. Although Jesus did many miraculous things and possessed the Spirit without measure (John 3:34) while He was on the earth, there is no mention in the Gospels of Jesus ever speaking in tongues during His ministry. The only mention of tongues in the four Gospels is in Mk. 16:17. Here we notice that speaking in “new tongues” is listed along with casting out demons, taking up serpents, drinking deadly poison and laying hands on the sick to heal them as accompanying signs to follow those who believe. The section concludes by saying, “And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following” (Mark 16:20).

All that one can find recorded in the New Testament on the subject of “speaking in tongues” is found in four passages in addition to the one in Mark. These are Acts 2:1-13; Acts 10:47 through 11:18; Acts 19:1-7; and I Cor. 12:1 through 14:40.

On the day of Pentecost the apostles “began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4). The record is crystal clear that the “other tongues” were actual languages. Visitors from some fifteen nations were there and asked “And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?” (Acts 2:8). This was a miracle for the apostles to be able to speak in languages which they had never learned. When they spoke in “tongues” it was not a jabber, jargon, conglomeration of unintelligent sounds.

The next mention of speaking in tongues occurs as Peter was preaching to the group of Gentiles gathered by Cornelius in his house. “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God” (Acts 10:44-46 NAS). In response, Peter asked if anyone could forbid their being baptized in water and then he “commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:48). Then in chapter 11, in reporting his experience with Cornelius and his household to the Jerusalem brethren and the apostles, Peter declared that this was “the like gift” which the apostles received on Pentecost. It is clear that the Gentiles spoke in actual, contemporary languages which they had not learned (Acts 11:15, 17).

In Acts 19 Paul found some disciples who knew only about the baptism of John and needed to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Paul baptized them and the record states, “And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they {began} speaking with tongues and prophesying” (Acts 19:6). If this incident of speaking in tongues was different from the other two just mentioned surely Luke would have given some explanation. Therefore, we conclude that these people spoke in other languages also.

In the epistles, speaking in tongues is discussed only in I Corinthians. It is listed as one of the "spiritual gifts" in I Corinthians 12:10, 28, 30. Paul mentions speaking "in the tongues of men and of angels" (I Corinthians 13:1) in comparison with love, pointing out the absolute necessity of love. Then the apostle plainly teaches that the miraculous spiritual gifts, including "tongues" would pass from the scene when that "which is perfect is come." "Love never fails; but if {there are gifts of} prophecy, they will be done away; if {there are} tongues, they will cease; if {there is} knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away" (1 Cor 13:8-10). When the full revelation of God's will for man was complete (the Lord's last will and testament) then there would no longer be any need for the temporary measures designed to assist the early church in its infancy. But while the church was in its infancy, and before God's revelation was completed, there was a need for special help to be given by God. This need was supplied by the exercise of the spiritual gifts.

When we turn to I Corinthians 14, we learn that "speaking in tongues" should be understandable (with an interpretation ... note very carefully verses 6-13, and verses 26-28) instructional (again note verse 6, verses 9-12, and verse 18, 19), and unto edifying (note verse 12b). Ecstatic utterances or nonsensical babblings do not meet these criteria as set forth by the inspired apostle in the context of I Corinthians 14, but "foreign" languages certainly do and they also harmonize with what is taught in Acts 2 (see above).

When we leave the period of the New Testament we are struck immediately with the fact that speaking in tongues is rarely mentioned in the Christian literature of the first three centuries. For example, Irenaeus (about 185 A.D.) believed that Paul was able to speak in many languages, and that these languages were human languages he had not learned but was inspired to speak. This is the only reference to speaking in tongues we have until we come to the time of John Chrysostom (about 345-407). During the second and third centuries a large number of books dealing with the acts of various apostles and the epistles to various groups were composed in imitation of the canonical Acts and Epistles of the New Testament. These are found in the Apocryphal New Testament, and contain all kinds of marvelous miracle stories. Yet, there is no evidence of speaking in tongues in them. In a list of specific powers mentioned in the Acts of John (chapter 106) speaking in tongues is absent.

Chrysostom understood the gift of speaking in tongues as the gift of speaking unlearned human languages. While he recognized that by his time these things had ceased he describes the gift of speaking in tongues in these words:

"So since they, the Corinthian Christians, had no clear knowledge and had not been nurtured in the ancient Scriptures, grace granted them some sensible proof of that energy. And so each began to speak, one in the tongue of the Persians, another in that of the Romans, another in that of the Indians, or in some other language. And this disclosed to outsiders that it was the Spirit in the speaker." (Homily on I Corinthians 12:1-11)

Through this entire period there is no other understanding of the New Testament speaking in tongues than speaking in human languages that one has not learned but which are somewhere spoken among men.

Can anyone miraculously "speak in tongues" today, in the biblical sense? Absolutely not! Since no one can speak in tongues in the biblical sense, then obviously what people who claim they can are

doing something other than biblical tongue speaking. Therefore, should we encourage anyone who thinks he can speak in tongues to go ahead and do so anyway? The answer is NO!

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