

The Purpose of Speaking in “Tongues”

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Speaking in “tongues” has become the badge of authenticity and authority in several ministries and in Charismatic and Pentecostal denominations. Yet what is passed off as the work of God’s Spirit, is nothing like the “tongues” recorded in the Scriptures. Modern “tongues” is a counterfeit.

The Old Testament Prophecy of “Tongues”

The outbreak of “tongues” on the Day of Pentecost should not be seen as a strange or surprising occurrence. It was prophesied by Isaiah seven hundred years before Pentecost. In order to understand the purpose and scope of “tongues” in the New Testament, we first need to understand the context of Isaiah 28 which prophesied its coming. Portions of this passage are quoted in the New Testament and applied to Christ and the Christian assemblies. For example, Isaiah 28:16, says, *“Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.”* This verse is quoted in Rom. 9:33, Rom. 10:11 & 1 Pet 2:6. It is referred to in Eph. 2:20. In each case, the writer interpreted this verse as applying to Jesus Christ and the New Testament assemblies. To the Jews, this “stone” was a stumbling stone. But, to those who believed, it was the foundation stone on which the Christian assembly was to be built. Paul wrote in Eph. 2:20 that the “Apostles and prophets” are the foundation of which Christ is the chief cornerstone. Therefore, there is ample evidence that this passage was speaking about the aftermath of the first coming of Christ.

However, this passage was primarily directed at the leadership of Israel during the time of Christ's ministry. It refers to Israel’s league with the Romans in crucifying Jesus Christ. And it predicted the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans which occurred in A.D. 70.

Isaiah 28:11-18

11 For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people,

12 To whom He said, “This is the rest with which You may cause the weary to rest,” And, “This is the refreshing”; Yet they would not hear.

13 But the word of the LORD was to them, “Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little,” That they might go and fall backward, and be broken And snared and caught.

14 Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scornful men, Who rule this people who are in Jerusalem,

15 *Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, And with Sheol we are in agreement. When the overflowing scourge passes through, It will not come to us, For we have made lies our refuge, And under falsehood we have hidden ourselves."*

16 *Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, A tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; Whoever believes will not act hastily.*

17 *Also I will make justice the measuring line, And righteousness the plummet; The hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, And the waters will overflow the hiding place.*

18 *Your covenant with death will be annulled, And your agreement with Sheol will not stand; When the overflowing scourge passes through, Then you will be trampled down by it.*

The following chapter specifically prophesied the utter second destruction of Jerusalem.

Before we go into the "tongues" in verses 11-13, let's examine the rest of this passage in order to fully understand the context. In verse 14, God was addressing the "scornful men" who were the leaders of Israel that delivered Jesus to be crucified. The "covenant with death" was the unholy alliance between the Chief Priests and the Roman officials. The Jewish leaders conspired together to put Jesus to death, and manipulated the Roman officials to carry out their deed. Yet, in verse 16, God says that He will lay the foundation stone, Jesus, who was the cornerstone of the Christian assembly, the new "Temple of God" that would replace the one destroyed by the Romans.¹ Whoever believed on Him would be saved.² But, for the rebellious Jewish leaders, verses 17 & 18 predicted their being "trodden down" by the very ones with whom they made their "covenant with death." That is, the Romans would come and destroy them. This occurred forty years after Pentecost.

This brings us back to verses 11-13.

11 *For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people,*
12 *To whom He said, "This is the rest with which You may cause the weary to rest," And, "This is the refreshing"; Yet they would not hear.*

13 *But the word of the LORD was to them, "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little," That they might go and fall backward, and be broken And snared and caught.*

¹ 2 Cor. 6:16

² V. 16

The “*Word of the Lord*” to the rebellious Jewish leaders was the words of Jesus Himself. He spoke to the people in parables, bits and pieces of truth, but in a form that they had difficulty understanding. He taught them “precept upon precept” and “line upon line” over a three year period. Why? so, “*that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.*” The Gospel accounts agree the Jesus’ communication to the Jewish leadership was intended to entrap them by their own wickedness, and reveal the hardness of their hearts.

Mark 4:10-12

10 But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable.

11 And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those who are outside, all things come in parables,

12 so that “Seeing they may see and not perceive, And hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, And their sins be forgiven them.”

It seems clear from both the Gospel accounts and this passage in Isaiah, that Jesus spoke to the religious leaders in order to condemn them, “*that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.*”³ Clearly then, the context of this passage concerns the condition of Israel at the time of Christ, His preaching to them, and their judgment for rejecting Him. The destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 was God's judgment on Israel for rejecting the Messiah, as Jesus stated plainly in Luke 19:41-44.

This is the context in which we find Isaiah’s prophecy of “tongues” that was fulfilled beginning at Pentecost. Since Isaiah said that through these strange tongues God was going to speak to “*this people*” (Israel), and in particular to “*the scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem,*” in the context of their impending judgment, it is apparent that “tongues” was the sign to unbelieving Israel of the impending judgment that was fulfilled in AD70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

The Purpose of “Tongues” According to Paul

The Apostle Paul quoted directly from these verses in Isaiah to explain the purpose of “tongues” as one of the “spiritual gifts.”

1 Cor 14:18-22

18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all;

³ Isa. 28:13

19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

20 Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.

21 In the law it is written: ***"With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; and yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,"*** says the Lord.

22 ***Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.***

In explaining the purpose for "tongues," Paul quoted from Isa. 28:11,12 where God told Israel that He was sending them a sign of judgment – people speaking a strange tongue to the Jewish nation. This would be a sign to the "scornful men" who ruled His people Israel. When we look at Acts 2, where "tongues" first made an appearance, we see clearly that this sign was actually fulfilled. The Jews were baffled that these Galileans were speaking in languages they had not learned.

After quoting this passage, Paul wrote, *"Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers."* In effect, Paul said, in this manner, (i.e. as God prophesied Israel's judgment) tongues are for a sign FOR UNBELIEVING ISRAEL, a sign of God's impending judgment on the leaders of Israel.

In A.D. 70 the Temple was destroyed and the priesthood and Sanhedrin were disbanded, and the remainder of this prophecy was fulfilled. Therefore, the prophesied purpose of "tongues" ceased in AD 70. There were no rulers of Israel after that. Israel ceased to be a governed nation. Once Isaiah's prophecy of Israel's destruction was fulfilled, the special sign sent to announce it could no longer serve its intended purpose.

While Isaiah wrote about the coming judgment on Israel, He indicated that God would not punish the believing remnant of Israel.

Isa 28:5

5 In that day the LORD of hosts will be for a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty to the remnant of His people,

The "remnant" is always seen in the Old Testament as the smaller group of believers within Israel (in contrast to the rest of the nation who were rebellious). At the time of Christ, the nation of Israel had to choose between following Christ, or following their rebellious leaders. Only a small remnant of Israel followed Christ (the disciples and a few others). Of the rest of the nation and its leaders God said:

Isa 28:7-8

7 But they also have erred through wine, and through intoxicating drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through intoxicating drink, they are swallowed up by wine, they are out of the way through intoxicating drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment.

8 For all tables are full of vomit and filth; no place is clean.

To the rulers of His people, God said:

Isa 28:11-14

11 For with stammering lips and another tongue he will speak to this people,

12 To whom He said, "This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest," and, "This is the refreshing"; yet they would not hear.

13 But the word of the LORD was to them, "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little," that they might go and fall backward, and be broken and snared and caught.

14 Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scornful men, who rule this people who are in Jerusalem,

Notice the above verses actually tell us the exact message that would be spoken in foreign tongues to Israel. Those who spoke in tongues basically announced, "***This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest,***" and, "***This is the refreshing.***" In other words, the miracle of foreign tongues was itself the sign, but also the messages being spoken in tongues told the people that THIS GOSPEL being preached by Peter and the early Christians was indeed the hope of Israel, the New Covenant, whereby they could "rest" and be "refreshed" from the burden of the Law. This message is what Luke called "*wonderful works of God*" the crowd heard every man in his own tongue. No doubt this "rest" is what Jesus referred to as well when He spoke of giving them "*rest for their souls.*"

Tongues were given to many believers in the churches after Pentecost. But, the purpose of tongues never changed. When Gentile Christians spoke in tongues, it was still a sign to the Jews living in those communities. The message was still, "*This is the refreshing*" and "*this is the rest.*" The exercising of this gift was a continuous sign that the destruction of the Jewish leaders and their system was imminent. This was well known to the early Church, since Jesus had predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in remarkably clear language.⁴

⁴ Luke 19:41-44

So widespread was the gift of tongues, that it began to dominate the gatherings in the Corinthian assembly. Paul's correction of that assembly in 1 Corinthians 14 is entirely in keeping with the stated purpose for tongues.

The Prophesied End of Tongues

If the stated purpose of "tongues" was a sign to unbelieving Israel of the impending judgment by the Romans and destruction of the leadership of Israel, it stands to reason that once the judgment came, tongues could no longer function as a sign of impending judgment. And this is what Paul seems to say in 1 Corinthians 13.

1 Cor 13:8-10 NASB

*8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of **prophecy**, they will **be done away** [καταργηθήσονται]; if there are **tongues**, they will **cease** [παύσονται]; if there is **knowledge**, it will **be done away** [καταργηθήσονται].*

*9 For we **know in part**, and we **prophesy in part**;*

*10 but when the perfect comes, **the partial** will **be done away** [καταργηθήσονται].*

NASB

In this passage, Paul lists three different types of gifts: prophecy, knowledge, and tongues, all of which were destined to end. Yet, only two of them he calls "partial" or "in part." That is, they were imperfect representations of what is to come later. Both "knowledge" and "prophecy" would find their completion in the coming Kingdom, when all is revealed that has not yet been revealed. But, "tongues" awaits no such counterpart, or more complete revelation. Paul did not classify "tongues" as being "partial." Additionally, when speaking of the two "partial" gifts, prophecy and knowledge, he used the verb "καταργηθήσονται" to describe their termination. The verb means "to be abolished." It is in the passive voice, which means that its termination is caused by some other person, event, or thing. And that "thing" or "event" is clearly stated in verse 10, "when the perfect [complete] comes." In other words, when a better form of revelation and prophetic knowledge arrives, it will render these two gifts obsolete and unnecessary.

However, Paul did not refer to "tongues" as "partial." This alone implies it has no future more perfect counterpart. Also, the verb παύσονται which Paul used to refer to its termination means "to cease of its own accord." It is in the middle voice form of the verb to "cease." The middle voice indicates that it ceases of its own, rather than being caused to cease by some external thing which replaces it.

That the prophetic gifts are made obsolete by the coming of a better revelation, yet tongues would cease without any such arrival of a better replacement, is strong

evidence that these things cease at different times and for different reasons. Unlike “prophecy” and “knowledge,” “tongues” would NOT cease at the same time, when “the perfect comes.” In fact, if tongues ceased of itself, its cessation cannot be connected with the coming of “the perfect” at all!

So, when does/did tongues cease? If the coming of “the perfect” does not cause tongues to cease, then logic demands that “tongues” was either to cease before “the perfect” comes, or else was to continue after the other gifts ceased. Had Paul meant tongues would continue into Christ’s Kingdom it seems rather odd that he would bother to mention it as ceasing at all. There would be no apparent end in view. If tongues were meant to continue in the Kingdom, Paul’s point, that faith, hope and love continue after the gifts end, would not be made from his mention of “tongues.” It would not be an effective example to make his point. Furthermore, Paul wrote in the next chapter that “tongues” are a sign for unbelievers not believers. This would seem a bit redundant in the Kingdom, with Jesus Himself present! Therefore, to be consistent with Paul’s point and with the grammar of the Greek text, we must understand that tongues would cease of its own accord PRIOR to the coming of “the perfect” when the other gifts would be replaced by a more perfect revelation of God.

Remember, Paul indicated in 1 Cor. 14:21-22 that “tongues” was the fulfillment of Isaiah 28, as a sign to Israel of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Once the PURPOSE for tongues ended there could be no more sign. And, as Paul indicated in 1 Cor. 13, “tongues” would simply cease of itself. That is, it just faded away. From the biblical data, we can assume that those with the gift still possessed it, but it was no longer given to others on an ongoing basis. The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 did not itself cause tongues to cease. But, the fulfillment of the prophecy, of which tongues was the sign, in effect made tongues useless and obsolete. Its purpose had been accomplished. And so it simply ceased being a sign of its own accord.

What did Paul mean by “the perfect,” that would replace the other prophetic gifts? In the previous article we showed from the biblical evidence that all of the gifts were given by God through the Apostles whom Jesus personally commissioned and sent (the eleven and Paul). That fact alone limits the distribution of these gifts to the Apostolic age, ending with the death of John at about AD 100. If our theory is correct, then “the perfect” had to come by the close of the Apostolic age. The answer is glaringly obvious. “The perfect” revelation that replaced “the partial” revelation given through the gifts was the completion of the New Testament. John closed out the New Testament canon by adding His Gospel, three epistles, and Revelation to the other works composed and compiled by Peter and Paul. John’s last book ends with these words:

Rev 22:18-19

*18 For I testify to everyone who hears the words of **the prophecy of this book**: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book;*

19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

Note that the warning was not to those who merely added “words” to John’s work. It was those who added “prophecy” to John’s work. This strongly implies that the gift of “prophecy” no longer functioned. There is of course one exception. In this very book, John prophesied the coming of two end time prophets who would announce the second coming of Jesus Christ (Rev. 11:3).

The Revival of Tongues

For nearly 2,000 years Christianity has been without “tongues.” But, around 1830 “tongues” and “prophesying” allegedly broke out among the MacDonald family in Port Glasgow, Scotland. This phenomenon quickly spread to the London congregation of Edward Irving, an ex-Presbyterian minister, who had been defrocked for his heretical views on the person of Christ (teaching that Jesus had a sin nature). Irving founded the Catholic Apostolic Church and laid the groundwork for both the pretribulation rapture view (later developed by John Darby) as well as many of the doctrines that undergird the modern Charismatic and Word of Faith movements. Irving's group prophesied many things, including the date of the rapture and the name of the Antichrist, all of which failed. Irving himself lost two of his children soon afterwards to illness, and within a couple of years he died himself, despite much pleading by him and his assembly to God for his healing. After his death, and the failure of all the prophetic utterances, most of the congregation disbanded. Interestingly, Irving had previously been preaching and predicting the reappearance of the spiritual gifts. He seems to have gotten his wish, albeit a counterfeit.

Modern Tongues

“Tongues” are not unique to Pentecostals and Charismatics. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) were founded the same year that Irving's church experienced the allegedly supernatural manifestations. The Mormons also claimed and practiced speaking in tongues and divine healing. A growing segment of Roman Catholics speak in tongues, yet teach a gospel of salvation by works and allegiance to Rome. Occultists, and witchcraft based religions, such as Santaria, practice speaking in tongues (that is – speaking in gibberish under the influence of a spirit). So, there is nothing externally apparent in modern day Charismatic “tongues” that requires a divine origin or identity with the biblical gift of tongues. What we see in many

Charismatic circles is indistinguishable from the “tongues” found in pseudo-Christian cults and other non-Christian groups. And the practice of modern Charismatic “tongues” is usually contrary to biblical precedent and instruction provided in Scripture.

The real gift of “tongues” in Scripture was the ability to speak in a foreign (known) language, but was meant to be understood by people present as a sign. This was clearly the case in Acts 2. And it was also true in the other occurrences of tongues in Acts. Not once do we find a case where “tongues” were spoken as some kind of “heavenly language.” Yet, today's “tongues” are basically gibberish. Rarely do we hear claims that modern tongues were actually understood by the people present fluent in such languages. And verifying the few claims that do exist has proven illusive. Neither do most churches who claim to exercise the genuine gift of tongues follow the Scriptural guidelines in 1 Cor. 14.

Some Objections Considered

1. Two Kinds of "tongues" Myth

1 Cor 14:2-5

2 For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.

3 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.

4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

The first question concerns the possibility of another kind of “tongues” besides what occurred at Pentecost. This other alleged kind of “tongues” is said to be a “prayer language,” and is commonly taught among Charismatic and Pentecostal groups. They think verse 2 above indicates that “tongues” should be used in prayer. However, Paul's point was not that this was the purpose of tongues. Rather, because of the massive confusion in the Corinthian assembly, with many people speaking in tongues at the same time, and there being no interpretations given for the hearers, no one understood the tongues. The effect of the wrong use of tongues by the Corinthian assembly was that no one besides God knew what was being spoken. Rather than the whole assembly being edified, only the speaker was edified by exercising his gift. In this chapter, Paul was restricting the use of tongues in the Church because its improper use by them did not edify the whole congregation. His comment, that those who speak in tongues in the assembly are edifying themselves, is not a positive statement, but a negative one. He did not mean that “tongues” was something to be used in private to edify ones self. Rather in the Corinthian assembly, the misuse of “tongues” by so many without any interpretation given was utterly useless to the assembly, only edifying the speaker and

no one else. The same is true of his statement that only God knew what they were saying. Both of these statements were sharp rebukes, not explanations for the purpose of tongues. Speaking in “tongues” in the congregation, with many people speaking simultaneously, with no interpretations being offered, was mass confusion because no one was edified except the speaker! No one knew what was being said but God alone! Paul wanted all things to be done unto edification of the entire assembly. That was not happening at Corinth, because of all the confusion. Granted, one with the gift of tongues could pray or even sing in the exercising of his gift. But, that is not the sole purpose of the gift. The purpose was a sign to the unbelieving of Israel. Here is my paraphrase of what Paul was actually saying in the above verses:

“The person speaking in a foreign tongue in your services is not speaking for the benefit of the whole church. He only speaks to God because nobody can understand what he is saying (even though he is speaking genuine mysteries of the Spirit)! But the person prophesying in your services is speaking edification, exhortation, and comfort to the whole congregation. Those speaking in tongues are only edifying themselves! But those who prophesy edify the whole congregation.”

Paul was drawing a sharp contrast between their exercise of “tongues” and “prophesy,” between what was actually prevailing in their services and the ideal situation which Paul was encouraging. Prophecy was much to be preferred because it was done in the common tongue and all could understand and be edified, exhorted, and comforted. Tongues, on the other hand, benefited no one except the speaker unless there was an interpretation given for every utterance. God alone knew what was being said. The speaker was indeed exercising his gift, but to no profit for anyone else. Paul did not forbid the use of tongues in the gatherings. But he did heavily restrict its use to only two or three, in turn, and only with an interpretation being given in the common language (Greek). In this way, “tongues” could also edify the whole congregation. The purpose of tongues was a sign to the lost, not to believers. Its role was primarily outside the assembled congregation of believers. But, it could be used within the meetings, provided an interpreter was present, in case unbelievers did come into their services (vs. 23-24). And with the use of the interpreter, this gift as well could still edify the whole congregation, not just speak to unbelievers.

Paul also mentioned briefly that tongues might be used in both prayer and singing.

1 Cor 14:15-17

15 What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.

16 Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say?

17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

While Paul did permit both praying and singing in tongues in the assembly meetings, he still kept the focus on interpretation so that the whole congregation could understand the prayer (or song). Verse 16 indicates that even prayer and singing in foreign tongues must be interpreted into the common tongue. Otherwise, how could those who are unlearned in that particular language say "amen" to the giving of thanks in prayer or song?

It is apparent then, that there was but one kind of "tongues" in Scripture, the same "tongues" witnessed by the crowd of Jews at Pentecost. There is only one kind of "tongues" mentioned in Acts, and in 1 Corinthians. It is not a "prayer language" that can be spoken by anyone in private prayer — a kind of babbling of unintelligible sounds. The kind of "tongues" that require an interpreter in the assembly services is the same kind of "tongues" used in public prayer. And even then (in prayer and singing) tongues still required an interpreter when used in the congregation. In verse 15 above, Paul told them that if they exercise "tongues" they must also add to it interpretation. That is what "*pray in the spirit*" AND "*pray with the understanding*" means. If you have tongues you must also have interpretation so that the whole congregation can say "amen" to your giving thanks.

2. The Heavenly Language Myth

Some claim that chapter 13 indicates "tongues" was a "heavenly language" spoken by angels. But, a closer look indicates otherwise.

1 Cor 13:1-3

1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

It is apparent that Paul was using hyperbole here, not speaking literally, just as Jesus did when He spoke of plucking out the eye, or cutting off the hand. Paul did not expect anyone to speak with the language of angels any more than he expected any of them to

do the other things in this passage. Did anyone speak in ALL known languages? No. Did anyone possess ALL knowledge and wisdom, and could remove mountains at will? No. Did anyone give away all that they had to feed the poor, and then offer their body to be burned? No, of course not. Paul was using the most extreme things imaginable in order to show that even if someone could do all these things, it means absolutely nothing without love. That he included speaking in angelic languages in his list of hypothetical hyperbole is an indication that they did NOT speak with angelic tongues, just as they did not actually do the other things listed. Otherwise Paul's hypothetical hyperbolic list loses its intended shock value.

From a careful examination of all of the relevant Scripture, only one scenario explains all of the evidence, both explicit and circumstantial, both biblical and historical. It is that the gifts were intended to be temporary until a more perfect revelation could be prepared and delivered to the Church. All of the supernatural spiritual gifts were given through the agency of the Apostles of Jesus Christ, and were intended to be the Spirit's confirmation of the Apostles as true witnesses to Jesus and His message. Gifts were no longer given once John died, shortly after completing the canon of the New Testament. "Tongues" was unique, in that it served a special purpose as a sign to Israel of its impending judgment. It ceased of its own accord after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, no longer serving any function.

Modern supernatural "spiritual gifts" are either counterfeit originating from another power apart from God's Spirit, fake, or possibly some new work of God. But, even if some are true works of God, they are not the actual gifts given by the Spirit to the early Church because those were specifically said to end. There is no prophecy of a revival of the gifts, only a prophecy of two witnesses that will prophesy just before Jesus returns.