

TONGUES

Roger E. Dickson

The word "tongues" is used in the New Testament to refer to languages. In the present-day religious world there is the phenomenon of ecstatic gibberish, or uncontrolled speech that is commonly confused with the tongues of the New Testament. Ecstatic gibberish is the result of an excited or hysterical state of emotion when individuals speak uncontrollable sounds. This is a common practice of religions that believe in the Bible, as well as, many religions that do not have the Bible as a foundation for their belief and practice. Religious people who do not believe in the sonship of Jesus often practice the emotional ecstatic utterances of speaking in "tongues." However, we must not confuse this known psychological phenomenon of the misguided religious world with the tongues that are mentioned in the New Testament. Because non-Christian religious groups throughout the world speak with "tongues" does not mean that the Holy Spirit is working among these groups.

I. NEW TONGUES

The only mention in prophecy of tongues (languages) in the Bible is a statement by Jesus in Mark 16:17 in the context of miraculous works. Jesus stated, *"And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with **new tongues**."**

A. New method of speaking in languages:

The Greek word *kainos* (new) is used in Mark 16:17 in reference to tongues. This word refers to a **newness in quality**. Reference is not to a newness in chronological order. In other words, there would not be a new kind of tongue that had never been spoken before in the history of man. **Emphasis is on a fresh**

new way of speaking. In the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus, the fresh new way would be the Spirit-inspired way. The Holy Spirit would empower individuals to **speak in languages that they had never studied.**

B. Visual recognition of languages:

In the prophecy of Mark 16:17 Jesus said that the tongues would be a **sign**. This is precisely what is stated in Hebrews 2:3,4. A sign is something that is **seen**. Therefore, when the prophecy of tongues is fulfilled, it must be something that is seen. Also, this empirical evidence of tongues would confirm the word of God. In this prophecy we see one of the first purposes for the gift of tongues. The Spirit-inspired ability to speak unstudied languages was to be an open manifestation to confirm the spoken word of God. The text continues to state that they did go forth and preach. The sign of the miracles in the text did follow them in order to confirm their message of the gospel.

Since the preaching of the gospel was to be before unbelievers, then we assume that the blessing of the speaking in tongues (languages) about which Jesus spoken, was the speaking in languages that the early evangelists could do without ever studying the languages by which they communicated the gospel to unbelievers. The purpose for the gift, therefore, was for evangelistic purposes, not the self-manifestation of one's spirituality. The gift of tongues was a functional gift. It was never meant to be a gift that manifested one's spiritual relationship with God. Paul spoke in many different languages simply for the purpose of preaching the gospel to many different linguistic groups of people. Paul's life of world evangelism, therefore, was the practical manifestation of the fulfillment of speaking in languages about which Jesus

* Biblical text: 21st Revised King James Version

prophesied in Mark 16:17.

II. FULFILLMENT OF THE PROMISE

There are four cases recorded in the New Testament when men and women spoke in languages in fulfillment of the promise of Jesus. As we examine each of these cases, one can clearly define the meaning of tongues and the purpose of the gift in the early church.

A. Languages in Jerusalem (At 2:1-13):

On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 religious Jews and proselytes were gathered in Jerusalem from many nations (vss 9-11). The apostles were empowered with the Holy Spirit and began to “*speak with other languages, as the Spirit gave them utterance*” (vs 4). Verse 6 states that “*everyone heard them speak in his own language.*” Those present asked concerning the happening, “*And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?*” (vs 8). They also stated, “*We hear them speaking in our own languages wonderful works of God*” (vs 11). If one would simply read these verses without reading into them any modern-day ecstatic utterances of human origin, it would be clearly understood that Luke is describing a miraculous endowment of speaking in languages which the apostles received.

The purpose for the apostles’ speaking in different languages on this occasion was functional. There were many different people present on this particular day of Pentecost who had come from throughout the world. The apostles did not have time to learn the languages of these people in order to preach the gospel to them. Thus the speaking in foreign languages was instant, and for the purpose about which Jesus spoke in Mark 16:17.

There are two different Greek words used in the text of Acts 2 in reference to the languages that were spoken. The Greek word *glossa* is used in verses 3,4,11 and 26. This word refers to a **known foreign language**. It is used in this manner in the context of these

passages. In verse 4 the apostles “*began to speak with other languages [glossa], as the Spirit gave them utterance.*” The tongues here are defined in verse 11 where the word is used again. “*We hear them speaking in our own language [glossa] the wonderful works of God.*” Without doubt, the meaning is that the apostles were speaking in the languages of the people who were present.

The Greek word *dialektos* is used in verse 8. This term refers to a **dialect or language**. It is used in this manner in the context of Acts 2. Those from every nation who heard and saw the apostles preaching, stated, “*And how is it that we hear, each in our own language [dialekto] in which we were born?*” The apostles were not only speaking in the languages of the people who were present, but also in the dialects of the different language groups.

Notice that the proof of the apostles’ speaking in languages came from the “unbelievers” who were present, not the believers. The visiting Jews gave their testimony to the fact that the apostles were speaking in the different languages, for they spoke the languages the apostles were speaking. It is not the responsibility of believers to give testimony to the fact that one is speaking in a language that he has never studied.

The Jews of Acts 2 came from areas where ecstatic gibberish was undoubtedly practiced in pagan religions. However, when they came to Jerusalem and experienced the events of Acts 2, they recognized that what the apostles spoke were the languages of their homelands, not the gibberish they had witnessed in pagan temples. They knew that the apostles were not speaking ecstatic utterances. They were speaking the languages of the people who were present.

The proclamation of the people proves that the tongues which the apostles spoke were actual languages. From this experience and context, therefore, we must define the rest of the New Testament references to speaking

in tongues as speaking in languages. Acts 2 is the dictionary for determining of tongues that is mentioned throughout the New Testament.

B. Lanugages in Caesarea (At 10,11):

When Peter and his company went to the Gentile house of Cornelius, he began to speak to them concerning the gospel. However, he was interrupted by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the entire household of Cornelius. Those who were with Peter *“heard them speak with languages [glossa] and magnify God”* (10:46). There are two things that are evident about this incident that forces us to understand that they were speaking in languages and not unknown gibberish.

1. Peter identifies this experience by comparing it with the Jerusalem experience that he and the other apostles had when the Spirit came upon them in Acts 2:1-4. In Acts 11:15 Peter explained to those in Jerusalem that *“the Holy Spirit fell upon them [Cornelius and his household], as upon us [the apostles] at the beginning.”* The evidence that the Spirit had fallen upon them was that they spoke in tongues. The tongues of Acts 10 were the same tongues as in Acts 2. Peter, therefore, identified the tongues of the household of Cornelius with the languages of Acts 2. Cornelius and his house spoke in languages, not unknown gibberish.

2. The household of Cornelius was heard to be glorifying God. If those present in Cornelius’ house could not understand what Cornelius and his household were speaking, then how could they have known what they were saying? Verse 46 plainly states that they heard them **magnify God**. If the tongues were some unknown ecstatic gibberish, then they would not have known if they were magnifying God. Cornelius and his household were speaking in foreign languages that they had not before studied. The visiting Jews with Peter understood that they were glorifying God. We could therefore assume, that the

Gentiles of Cornelius’ household were speaking in the Hebrew language, the language the visiting Jews could understand. This is why the tongues in this context was a sign. **The gift to speak in languages was a sign to the Jews that the Gentiles had a right to the message of the gospel and the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit.**

C. Languages in Ephesus (At 19:1-7):

When Paul came to Ephesus, he found about twelve disciples who had not been baptized in the name of Jesus. After he had taught them and *“they were immersed in the name of the Lord Jesus”* (vs 5), Paul laid hands on them. As a result of Paul’s laying on of hands, *“the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with languages [glossa] and prophecied”* (vs 6).

The speaking in tongues in this verse is not defined in the immediate context that a language is being spoken. However, by this time in the history of the church, tongues did not need to be defined. In recording the incident, Luke assumes that we will use common sense in understanding the tongues here as we understand them from chapter 2 and 10. Luke is writing to Theophilus who undoubtedly did not have any other New Testament letter other than the book of Luke, a document to which Luke also wrote Theophilus (At 1:1-4). Therefore, we would understand that speaking in different languages was what Luke’s wants to understand in the context of Acts 19. In the context, Theophilus would understand this speaking as languages of men. Luke would certainly not be stating that Acts 2 and 10 are references to languages, and at the same time, and without explanation, mean that the Ephesians spoke in ecstatic gibberish. Therefore, we must understand this text as Theophilus so understood it. We assume that he understood that Luke was referring to langauges.

D. Languages in Corinth (1 Co 12-14):

The letter to the Corinthians was written to

correct sin in a church that boasted about their forbearance with sin and arrogance over their division. They were even competitive in the use of their miraculous gifts of prophecy and speaking in languages. Paul writes this direct and loving condemnation of their present situation in a last minute effort to correct their spiritual apostasy. In the context of his judgments he discusses their misuse of the miraculous gifts that he had imparted to them by the laying on of his hands.

The following points clarify some supposed problem points of 1 Corinthians 12-14. The following important points clearly affirm that Paul was not discussing ecstatic utterances in these chapters. He was discussing their use of the imparted gifts of languages and prophecy.

1. “Kinds of languages” (1 Co 12:10): It is affirmed that the use of the word “tongues” by some translators in the context of 1 Corinthians 12 was a reference to different ecstatic utterances. However, the word “kinds” (*genos*) in 1 Corinthians 12:10 refers to that which is different, **but of the same nature, kind or species**. In other words, Paul was referring to the different languages the Corinthians spoke. Though they were different, **they were all languages of men**.

2. “Languages of angels” (1 Co 13:1): This phrase is not referring to something that was spoken heavenly beings. He is not referring to an ecstatic language that was being spoken by some in the Corinthian church. It is not necessary to assume that Paul even speaks of a real language of angels in order to understand his argument. This is indicated by the use of the subjunctive mood in the text. The subjunctive “if” suggests probability. In other words, Paul uses the subjunctive mood in this verse to express a hyperbole, an exaggeration to express a truth. We could paraphrase the passage as follows: “Just suppose that it might be that one could speak in the language of angels.” What Paul is

saying is that even if he had the ability to speak with languages as angels, but had not a loving attitude, such an ability would be useless. Therefore, it is ridiculous to suppose that Paul actually spoke in the tongues of angels. He spoke in the tongues of men, but he never claimed to have spoken in the tongues of angels. If the Corinthians were actually speaking in the tongues of angels, then they had been blessed with a greater ability than even the apostles on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, for the apostles spoke only in the languages of men.

3. “Speaking mysteries” (1 Co 14:2): Paul is not talking about some language that was not known by man. The word “mystery” does not refer to something that is ecstatic. Paul was simply using a word which was commonly used to denote spiritual truth that was communicated to man from God (See Rm 16:25; 1 Co 2:7; Cl 1:25-29; Ep 3:3-5). What was spoken was a mystery to man, but not God.

The phrase “in the Spirit” refers to inspiration. As previously discussed, a consistent understanding of this phrase as it is used in the Bible would lead us to interpret inspiration by the Holy Spirit in the context of this passage. Therefore, it was by inspiration of the Spirit that the Corinthians spoke the mysteries of the truth. This was necessary because they had no copies of either the Old or New Testaments. The truth was distributed throughout the early church by the laying on of the apostles’ hands.

In the context of the above verse, **no one understood what the speaker was saying simply because there was no one present who had the gift of interpretation**. This is why Paul made the exhortation of verse 13, “*Therefore let him who speaks in a language pray that he may interpret.*” This is also why Paul prohibited one from speaking in tongues when there was no interpreter present. “*But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the assembly, and let him speak to himself and to God*” (vs 28).

The phrase “*does not speak to men but to God*” does not assume that the speaker cannot understand what he is saying. 1 Corinthians 14:28 indicates that if there is no interpreter present, the individual thus speaks to himself and to God. Therefore, he does understand what he is saying, though those around him do not. This is why Paul gives the instruction that such a one should keep silent if there is no interpreter present in the assembly. He should not disturb the assembly of the saints for his own benefit.

4. “He edifies himself” (1 Co 14:4): Some have used this statement to prove that those who speak ecstatic gibberish are edifying themselves and by edifying the church. However, verse 5 states that the church is not edified if there is no interpreter. Verse 6 states that there is no profit to the church unless there is communication of teaching in the language that the church can understand. Verses 7-11 affirm that such speaking is useless unless it can be understood by the assembly. For this reason, Paul exhorts, “*Therefore the one who speaks in a language pray that he may interpret*” (vs 13). What Paul is saying in the context is that **if there is no understanding there is no edification.** If ecstatic gibberish is in the context, then such must be understood in order to edify both the individual and the assembly. But if the assembly cannot be edified by the gibberish, then neither can the one who supposedly speaks. Therefore, those who would claim to speak in tongues must keep silent in the assembly.

5. “Pray that he may interpret” (1 Co 14:13): This passage is used to affirm that one should pray for the gift of interpretation. In other words, these are those who had already had the apostles’ hands laid on them in order to receive the gift of languages (At 18:8). It is the Spirit who distributes the particular gifts (1 Co 12:11). Therefore, they were to pray that the Spirit might give them the gift of

interpretation.

We cannot assume that they were to pray for a miraculous gift if they had not had the apostles’ hands laid on them. It took more than praying to receive the gift of tongues. The Corinthian situation proves that this gift did not come only in answer to prayer. The Corinthians were in a situation where there was no interpreter of various languages that were being spoken. **If prayer was the only thing that was necessary in order to receive the gift of interpretation, then there would never be a situation where an interpreter was not present, for one could simply pray and receive the gift from God.** God would give the gift of interpretation in order to stop the confusion. But in this case in Corinth, there were languages being spoken without an interpreter of that language being present. Paul’s instructions in this case were those of verse 28. **If no interpreter is present, then the one who is speaking in a language that cannot be understood by the assembly, must be quiet.**

6. “Understanding is unfruitful” (1 Co 14:14): This concept is misunderstood by some to refer to one not understanding the gibberish the speaker may be speaking. Those of this persuasion affirm that they do not have to understand what is being said. The fact is that they do not and cannot. However, this is not what Paul is discussing in 1 Corinthians 14:14.

What Paul means is **if the audience does not understand what is being prayed in a tongue,** then there is no fruit born from the prayer. If the audience does not understand the communication in prayer, therefore, the prayer is useless to them.

The entire context of 1 Corinthians 14 is the edification of the church in the assemblies. This is even true of public prayers. The church is not edified if the prayers are in a language that cannot be understood by the assembly. This is why Paul says, “*I will pray with the Spirit, and I will also pray with the*

understanding ...” (vs 15). In other words, **if God’s revealed will flows through the inspired individual, but straight back to God, then the assembly benefits nothing.** The Holy Spirit did not in the first century inspire people to speak to God. This would be God speaking to Himself.

7. “Strange languages” (1 Co 14:21): Paul is here quoting from Isaiah 28:11. In the context of Isaiah 28:11, Isaiah was referring to the languages of the Assyrians who took Israel into captivity. He was not referring to ecstatic utterances. The fact that Paul uses this quotation is proof that he was discussing languages in 1 Corinthians 14, and not ecstatic gibberish. Isaiah meant languages in the context of Isaiah 28. Therefore, the same meaning must be carried with the passage into the context of 1 Corinthians 14.

8. “Interpretation”: The Greek word *diermaneutias* (interpretation) is used in thirteen different places in the New Testament in one form or another. **It is used to refer to the translation of words from one known language into another known language** (See Jn 1:38,41; 9:7; At 13:8; Hb 7:2). An exception to this would be Luke 24:27 where Jesus interpreted the Scriptures to the disciples. But even in the context of Luke 24:27, it is the interpretation of thought from one known language into another. In the context of 1 Corinthians 14, therefore, we must understand that the word is being used in its most common manner. It is not used to refer to the translation of gibberish into a language of man. The word is never used to refer to the translation of some unheard of language into a language that is known by man. It is used in the sense that the interpreter translates a spoken language that is known by mankind into the tongue of others who are present.

III. THE PURPOSE OF TONGUES

There were three purposes for the gift of

languages in the first century. When these purposes were accomplished, the gift ceased.

A. Tongues were a sign:

Speaking in tongues was one of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised that signs would go with those who believe (Mk 16:17). When the early disciples went forth, therefore, the Lord worked with them as a group, *“confirming the word through the accompanying signs”* (Mk 16:20). God bore *“witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will”* (Hb 2:4).

God meant for the miraculous speaking in languages that had not been studied to be a sign to the unbelievers. Paul wrote, *“Therefore languages are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers ...”* (1 Co 14:22). Speaking in unstudied languages was an open manifestation that God was miraculously working in the church for evangelistic and edification purposes.

B. Tongues were for edification:

Paul wrote, *“He who speaks in a language edifies himself, but he who prophecies edifies the church”* (1 Co 14:4). If an interpreter was not present when one spoke in tongues, then only the one who spoke was edified. However, if an interpreter was present, **then the speaking in languages could edify the entire assembly.** 1 Corinthians 14:4 refers to a time when no interpreter was present. In this case, Paul commands the one speaking in languages to keep silent because he would only be disrupting the assembly of the church by his edification of himself through the use of his gift.

Paul desired to go to Rome in order that he might impart to the infant believers their spiritual gifts (Rm 1:11). Such would profit this young church in firmly establishing them in the faith (1 Co 12:7). The gifts would enrich them or confirm them in the faith (See 1 Co 1:4-9).

The early converts were converted out of the pagan religions of Greek and Roman

mythology. In the absence of a written New Testament, the Holy Spirit had to directly guide the early churches in the faith. The gifts were under the control of the possessors (1 Co 14:27-34, 40), though the type of gift was evidently distributed by the will of the Spirit (1 Co 12:11). Thus the Spirit ministered to the infant churches through the individuals who had received the laying on of the apostles' hands. All was done for the building up of the body of Christ.

C. Tongues were for evangelism:

Not only were the assemblies of the early churches composed of those who spoke many languages, but the early evangelists were commissioned to go to every ethnic group of the world (Mt 28:19-20). In order to effectively preach and teach in a new language, it takes six months to a year and a half of hard study and practice of the new language. Can you imagine Paul taking this much time just to be able to speak in the language of one particular group of people to whom he went. He said in 1 Corinthians 14:18, *"I thank my God I speak with languages more than you all."* Paul was gifted by the Holy Spirit to speak in many languages. This allowed him and other evangelists to rapidly evangelize the first century world.

IV. THE CESSATION OF TONGUES

The New Testament teaches that the open manifestation of miracles to confirm the spoken word of God – this would include speaking in languages – has passed away and that there is no more a need to confirm the faith by miracles today. Miraculous gifts as speaking in tongues were given to the early Christians for the purpose of confirming and firmly establishing the faith (See Mk 16:17-20; Hb 2:3,4; Ep 4:11-16). In the going forth of the early disciples, the gospel was confirmed by the power of the Holy Spirit wherever it was preached (See At 20:23; 1 Co 4:19,20; 1 Th 1:5). Paul's preaching was confirmed by miracles, as well as the preaching of the

prophets and evangelists (Rm 15:18,19). However, when the word was confirmed by the miracles, and the New Testament was completed in written form, the miraculous gifts ceased (1 Co 13:8-10).

We must not misunderstand that the miraculous gifts, including languages, was given for a functional purpose in the early church. By being functional, they serve a purpose in initially establishing the early church. Once the function of the gifts was accomplished, and the written word of God completed, then there was no more a need for the miraculous gifts.

Paul concluded his instructions concerning the miraculous gifts in the assembly of the early church by stating, *"Let all things be done properly and in order"* (1 Co 14:40). This statement was made after he had given them instructions concerning speaking in their assemblies (1 Co 14:34-38). The word "order" means that when the disciples come together in assembly, their assemblies must be conducted with the same sobriety by which the Christian is to conduct his or her personal life.

Paul's instructions were given in a culture where pagans gathered for chaotic assemblies wherein people emotionally lost control of themselves, and then put on a public display of hysteria. But this should never be allowed to develop in the assembly of Christians. If in an assembly of Christians people are allowed to go emotionally out of control, then they are not assembling with the order by which Paul instructed in 1 Corinthians 14:40. What separated the assemblies of the pagan temples from the assembly of the Christians in the first century was that the Christians assembled in a spirit of sobriety and celebration, not for emotional chaos. Assembly leaders, therefore, who allow assemblies of disciples to become chaotic confusion are not qualified to lead the church in becoming sober minded in a world of social chaos. The unbeliever should be able to come into any assembly of the church and conclude that the people are not mad (1 Co 14:23).