

*Speaking in Tongues :A Scriptural Study*  
Based on Acts 2: 1–13

Scripture taken from the  
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What in the world is this issue of speaking in tongues? Why is it such an emotional issue to so many Christians? Because of the many questions that people have on the issue of tongues, we need to have a Biblical framework for what we believe.

In Acts 2 we find the fulfillment of Jesus promise of Baptism with the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:4 the disciples were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the spirit gave them utterance. This is a real event. It happened at a real time in history. It involves real people and it is recorded for us in the Word of God. Every Bible believing Christian accepts the fact that Acts, Chapter 2 happens just the way Luke recorded it for us. It is obvious that the gift of “tongues” is spoken of in scripture.

The issue we need to consider has nothing to do with doubting any part of the Bible. All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable. Every word has been created by God and is true. The issue we need to consider is, “How do we rightly divide the word of truth?”

If I need a loaf of bread I go down to the grocery store. Never once in all of my life have I gone out into my yard and picked up a piece of manna. It’s not because I don’t believe that God didn’t make manna for his people. It’s certainly not because I don’t believe that God could make manna for me today. It’s that I realize, from Scripture, that God had a purpose for miraculously supplying the children of Israel with manna and that purpose no longer exists, so God no longer performs that miracle. It’s not that He can’t. It’s not that He didn’t. Tongues are talked about in the Bible. They’re not nearly as prevalent as some people have us think, but they are certainly there. The issue at hand isn’t a matter of belief or disbelief of the Bible. The issue at hand is answering two questions from the clear teaching of scripture. The first question we need to answer is this: What exactly is the nature of Biblical tongues?

The word translated “tongue” in the New Testament is the Greek word *γλωσσα*. It has two very distinct meanings in classical Greek as well as the Koine Greek of the New Testament: 1) It can mean the tongue as an appendage in the mouth. Mark 7:33 says Jesus touched a dumb man’s tongue and he could speak. 2) It can also mean a spoken language. Rev. 7:9 speaks of a great multitude of all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues standing before the throne of God. Never, in any reference, anywhere was *γλωσσα* used for ecstatic, religious speech. The Greek language has words that refer to ecstatic speech but none of them are used in the Bible. New Testament tongues (or “languages” would be a better translation) were real spoken earthly languages.

There is only one place where tongues are described in the New Testament and that is in Acts 2:4–11. *And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other*

*tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."*

There is no question when the apostles spoke with tongues they spoken in known languages. The example is obvious languages. The word meaning is, spoken languages. The Book of Acts only mentions tongues two more times, so let's look at those and see if the definition of languages fits.

In Acts 10 Peter is sent by God to Cornelius' house. The significance here is that Cornelius and his household are non-Jews. All the first believers were Jewish. In fact, they didn't even believe that a non-Jew could be saved. God had to push Peter to go to these Gentiles. Acts 10:44-46: *While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. They asked him to stay a few days.*

Does the standard definition of "languages" fit? Of course it does. In fact in the next chapter Peter goes back to the Jerusalem church to give an explanation. Some were really upset at Peter for being invited to go to a gentile's house. Peter says, "God sent me, and when I got there something happened. *And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, "John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

To put this in its proper perspective realize that this is 8 years after Pentecost. The gospel finally breaks through to the Gentile world and Peter says the way that I knew that it did was because the same thing happened to them as happened to us on Pentecost. We spoke in other languages, they spoke in other languages. That was God's sign that they received the promise of the Holy Spirit, too. It was the same thing.

Now Peter didn't say its the same thing that happens to everybody when they get saved because it wasn't. Obviously it hadn't happened for 8 years because Peter went all the way back to point out the similarities. He didn't say the Holy Spirit came on them just like he did on everybody. This was a sign that God accepted Gentiles, too. The sign was the same as Pentecost, speaking in languages.

The single other place where tongues are specifically mentioned in Acts is Acts 19:1-6. *And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit."*

*And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.*

This is now 25 years after Pentecost. These individuals were disciples of John the Baptist, but they hadn't heard about the fulfillment of John's preaching. They were people in transition, remnants of the Old Testament saints. They were still looking for Messiah.

At that point Paul did just what we'd expect him to do. He said, in effect, "You guys are to be commended. You repented as John taught, but now you've got to make the next step. You must believe on the one who came after John, Jesus Christ."

They believed, and Paul laid hands on them to demonstrate that they were no longer to follow John's authority, but it was now apostolic. They were connected with Pentecost so God gave them the ability to speak with tongues. Nothing is said about ecstatic speech. There's no reason to change the obvious definition of "language." Tongues were real, human languages. The ability to speak in tongues was given by God. The speaker spoke in a previous unlearned language as a sign that God was at work.

We have people today telling us that tongues are a way to get closer to God. That tongues are a prayer language and speaking in tongues will make us closer to Him. Is that true? Tongues by nature are actual spoken languages, and we're going to come back to that in a minute. But what is the stated Biblical purpose for tongues? I Corinthians 14:21. *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.*

Here we find Paul quoting from the Old Testament to show that speaking in foreign languages was designed to be a sign to the unbelieving nation of Israel. The is a quote from Isaiah 28:11-12: *For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people, 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.*

Through Isaiah God was pronouncing judgment upon the kingdom of Judah for their apostasy. God had sent His prophets to warn them. In this case it was the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah and the other prophets spoke to the people in their own Hebrew tongue but the people of Judah didn't listen. In fact they laughed and mocked God's messengers and so finally Isaiah delivered this message. He spoke for God and He said, "If you're not going to listen in your own language, then I'm going to speak to you with men of other tongues and other lips and yet even then you won't hear." Well, God spoke through the Assyrians, they were the men of other tongues, and what God spoke was judgment upon Judah. The Assyrians overran Judah and carried away the people into captivity.

Now notice what Paul draws out of that. He says in verse 22 *therefore* (in other words he's drawing a conclusion based upon Isaiah's words in verse 21) *tongues are for a sign*. Back in I Corinthians 1:22 Paul explained that the Jews require a sign. The Jewish people are always wanting signs to

convince them that God is at work. In Isaiah's day the sign of God's judgment was men speaking foreign languages. In Apostolic times God used the very same sign as a warning to the Jews; men speaking in foreign language.

Jesus Christ wept over Jerusalem for their rejection of Him as Messiah and their coming destruction. He said, *Behold your house is left unto you desolate*. He stood by the temple as people marveled at the greatness of that structure and said, *Behold not one stone shall be left upon another when destruction comes*. Just as other languages were a sign to the men of Judah of God's judgment, so Paul says are divinely inspired languages a sign to unbelieving Israel of impending destruction.

Seven years after Paul penned these words the Jews rebelled against Roman domination, that rebellion lasted for four years until finally it ended when the 30 year old son of the emperor of Rome, a young General named Titus Flavius Vespasianus put an end to the rebellion. He sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, killed thousands of Jews and put an end to the very heart of Judaism, the Temple sacrifices, which still haven't been carried out to our day.

The genuine gift of tongues wasn't some prayer language, it wasn't a sign of anyone's salvation, it wasn't a sign that God was giving a special blessing to believers. The Biblical purpose was to be a sign to unbelievers. Specifically, a sign to unbelieving Israel of God's impending judgment. Tongues were a sign that judgment was coming, that God was setting aside Israel, and that God was beginning to work through all nations in establishing His Church. The people of God were no longer going to be a national entity. During this age the people of God come from every nationality and ethnic and racial background. Whoever will believe on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved.

It's ironic that I Corinthians Chapter 14 is the place where most of the false teaching about tongues is based. Look at the first 5 verses of I Corinthians 14 with the purpose of tongues as a sign for unbelievers in mind.

Verse 1: *Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy*. The reason that I Corinthians 12–14 was written was to correct a problem. The problem was that some within this church had the ability to speak in tongues. It was a God-given ability which only some had. The previous chapters tell us that certain gifts were given to certain people but that not all people possess all gifts, including tongues.

Some with this gift were using it in the church service so that they could appear special. They wanted recognition and this was a visible, audible demonstration. They were proud and let everyone else know about it. Paul says in the church the most important thing is communication of truth and therefore prophecy, or speaking forth the Word of God, is the most important gift. Why desire prophecy over another gift like tongues?

Verse 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*.

Remember tongues are for a sign. Tongues are foreign languages. Therefore if you get up and speak in a tongue in church no one understands you except God. Paul is not saying "Wow, what a blessing

tongues are.” He’s not saying, “Here’s a special way to communicate with God.” This is all negative reasoning.

Verse 3: *But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.* When God’s word is spoken so that others can understand the result is edification, exhortation and comfort.

Verse 4: *He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.* One commentary said of this verse, “Paul encouraged them to condone the practice of speaking with other tongues in their worship of God and in their prayer lives as a means of spiritual edification and this wonderful, supernatural means of spiritual edification is for everyone of God’s children.”

Talk about being 180 degrees off! That’s the exact opposite of what Paul is saying. If you speak with a tongue and nobody else has any idea what you said but they say, “Wow, that’s fantastic.” and elevate you as a special person because of your ability, you get edified, but no one else does.

Now remember, the Biblical gift of tongues wasn’t bad. There was nothing wrong with it. It was just to be used properly. The point is it was a real language and it was a sign gift.

Here’s the key, the thing we need to keep in mind. People all around us are claiming to have experiences which they say are Biblical. We don’t need to go on a crusade against those people. I’m not here to deny that they have experienced something.

But, I want to challenge you today to evaluate everything you see and hear by running it through the grid of Scripture. Because someone gets up and speaks in some type of ecstatic speech and then points out the fact that people spoke in tongues in the Bible does not mean that they are the same thing. We begin by Biblically examining the nature and purpose of tongues and then we evaluate the experience. The experience, no matter how dramatic or spiritual it may appear, has to live up with Scripture.

The doctrinal statement at Faith Community Church says this: “The sign gifts, miracles, tongues, and healing, and gifts involving direct revelation from God, prophecy, wisdom and knowledge, were temporary gifts designed to confirm the message of the Apostles and to lay the foundation of the 1st century church.”

Some people react against a statement like that by saying that we’re trying to limit what God can do. Remember it’s not a matter of what God could do, but what does God’s Word say He will do.

I Corinthians 13:8 tells us clearly what will happen. *Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.* Prophecy and knowledge both involve direct revelation from God. We’re told in the English text that prophecies will fail and knowledge will vanish away. If you were in Corinth as a recipient of this letter reading it in the original Greek you wouldn’t see two different words there for the fate of prophecies and knowledge but the same word. It means “to put out of commission” or “to render inoperative.” Prophecies and direct knowledge will be rendered inoperative by something. Something will cause them to be no longer needed.

Reading it in Greek you would also see that Paul chose a different word to describe the fate of tongues. The word that's used means "to cause to cease." Here the verb happens to be in the middle voice, not passive like the one describing prophecies and knowledge. They will be done away with, but tongues will cease of themselves.

Verses 9 & 10 read, *For we know in part and we prophesy in part, But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.* When you've got the whole, you don't need the bits and pieces that make up the whole. When the last book of the New Testament was completed in 96AD, there was no longer any need for direct revelation from God. Now we have all scripture given by inspiration of God. II Timothy says, *it is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.* Prophecy and knowledge were rendered inoperative, no longer necessary, by the completion of the Word of God. They were the bits and pieces succeeded by the complete when the Bible was finished.

But what about the gift of tongues? If you want to do an interesting study pick up any commentary on I Corinthians written a hundred years back and you will find the writer assuming that tongues ceased back in the days of the Apostles. For 1800 years no one was claiming to speak in tongues. For example:

*Jamison, Faucett & Brown* (before 1899) "A primary fulfillment of St. Paul's statement took place when the church attained its maturity. Then tongues entirely ceased"

*Ellicott* (1857) "They passed away when the need for them in the church had ceased."

*A. T. Robertson* (1911) "Tongues seemed to have ceased first of all the gifts."

*Lenski* (1937) "Paul writes they shall cease, stop and they have indeed stopped long ago."

If God expected tongue speaking to be a common experience for all Christians then what in the world happened in the church for 1800 years? As soon as you divorce yourself from the flow of history and see yourself as some unique entity in God's program you are in trouble. God said tongues would cease and they did. They ceased of themselves when their purpose as a sign that God was setting aside Israel and moving out to the nations was fulfilled.

Now if that is true what is going on today? Obviously people around us are having some kind of experience. Something is coming out of their mouth that certainly isn't English. You can't deny that some people are having an experience, but if tongues have fulfilled their purpose and have been silent for 1800 years, just what kind of experience are people having?

It would seem reasonable that if today's tongues are Biblical they could be verified by language experts listening to those speaking. After listening to hour after hour of recorded tongues speaking, no one has identified a verifiable language yet.

William E. Welmers, Professor of African Languages at UCLA said this in an article in *Christianity*

*Today*, “From the viewpoint of a Christian linguist the modern phenomenon of Glossolalia would appear to be a linguistic fraud and monstrosity given even the most generous interpretation of I Corinthians 12–14.”

Dr. Eugene A. Nida of the America Bible Society conducted a study at the Toronto Institute of Linguistics. His conclusion was that the so-called tongues was nothing but ecstatic speech. He wrote “on the basis of what I have learned about this type of Phenomena of tongues in other parts of the world, apparently there is the same tendency to employ one’s own invention of sounds, in nonsense combinations, but with simulated foreign features.”

Add to that the fact that ecstatic speech is also found among Mormons, Muslims, Eskimos, Tibetan Monks, and it was common in the pagan worship in Corinth. The parapsychology lab at the University of Virginia Medical School has even reported incidents of tongues speech among those practicing the occult. Ecstatic speech isn’t limited to Christianity by any means.

So then, if people today aren’t actually speaking with the Biblical gift of tongues, but are speaking ecstatic speech based upon their own language background, where do the sounds come from?

Listen to this quote from George Gardiner, a former Pentecostal minister: “I have publicly said many times, ‘Give me a group of people who will do what I tell them to do, sing, relax, anticipate, and go through the right motions and it will only be a matter of time before some will speak ecstatically. It is a psychological phenomenon and bears no resemblance to the tongues of the Bible! I have heard hundreds of messages in tongues and interpretations. Not one ever added anything of value to a meeting. Everyone was a rehash of scripture, (often quoted inaccurately), some promoted false teaching, some were wildly fanciful productions, some come designed to rebuke individuals with whom the speaker has had a disagreement! All the interpretations were delivered in Elizabethan English, which often left me wondering why the Lord never spoke in anything but King James English.’ ”

Dr. E. Mansell Pattison, a member of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies, and an instruction at the University of Washington School of Medicine after repeated studies of tongues wrote: “Our data can be understood to demonstrate that the same stereotypes of speech will result whenever conscious willful control of speech is interfered with, whether by injury to the brain, by psychosis, or by passive renunciation of willful control. This corroborates our present assessment that tongues speaking is a stereotyped pattern of unconsciously controlled vocal behavior which appears under specific emotional conditions.”

There are clear psychological explanations that can be offered for the phenomenon of modern day “tongues speaking.” All of this certainly has nothing to do with the New Testament gift of tongues which we know from history and from scripture ceased after the Apostolic era.

What then can we conclude from all of this? There are certainly many sincere and honest Christians involved in the charismatic movement today and this study was not meant to be an attack on them. Quite the contrary, we get from Paul’s word to the Corinthians in Chapter 13 that we are to love those who might be in error, and yet love always rejoices in truth.

Despite the clear explanation from the word of God and from analysis of the phenomenon of tongues, Christians and non-Christians alike continue to claim to speak in tongues. New people “get the gift” everyday. Charismatic churches are springing up everywhere and teachers and writers claim that this is work of the Holy Spirit in the last days.

What is the explanation? Why in the face of all the evidence do so many people flock to this experience? The basic reason is spiritual hunger! It all started, with a spiritual hunger as people reacted to coldness, formalism, ritual and lifelessness in the church. They said, “Experience is more important than the Bible,” and the end result was a total rejection of the Word of God. Speaking in ecstatic speech, being slain in the Spirit, falling under the power; all these things going on today have absolutely no foundation in God’s Word. And the longer it goes on the further away from the scriptures the experiences get.

Maybe you have a spiritual hunger. Maybe your religion has been lifeless and cold. It could possibly be that you are not saved. It has been said that God has created us all with a “God-shaped” vacuum inside. Until God comes into our life through faith in Christ and fills that vacuum we’ll never have peace. Christ died to make us part of the family of God and until you trust in Him and His death and resurrection for you there will be no satisfaction of that spiritual hunger.

But then maybe you are a believer and there’s still a lack of fulfillment and you say I’m looking for something more. You know, I’ve never met any Christian yet who has carried out Romans 12:1 and 2 and still feels unfulfilled. Paul told the Roman church: *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

Whenever I find a Christian with that feeling of still missing something in their life, I usually find that they are neglecting their Bible, they’re hit-and-miss in prayer, they never share their faith. And then along comes someone who says “Try this experience. You’ll feel instantly close to God. You’ll have so much more reality in your Christian life.” And see, it doesn’t cost anything. It’s hard to be a living sacrifice, It’s easy to accept this supposed quick fix from God. And multitudes of people end up like the dog in the fable who crossed the bridge with a bone in his mouth. He looked down and saw his reflection in the water. The bone he saw in the reflection looked better than the one in his mouth. So he dropped the substance for the shadow and went away hungry.

The Psalmist said: *The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous. More to be desired are they than Gold, sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned, and in the keeping of them there is great reward.*

## How You Can Be Certain of Going to Heaven

### Our Problem :

We are separated from God by our sins.

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23*

### Our Solution:

We try to earn our way to heaven through good works.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God: not of works, lest anyone should boast. Ephesians 2:8-9*

### God's Solution:

God has already paid the penalty for our sins. God Himself took on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, died in our place and rose to demonstrate victory over death.

*For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21*

### Our Response:

Trust the Lord Jesus Christ and the payment He made for you on the cross. The best you know how, depend upon Him and Him alone to forgive your sins. Accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior brings you into a right relationship with God by removing the barrier of sin.

*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Acts 16:31*