

Speaking in Tongues: Manifesting the Spirit of God

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I am one among the many growing number of Christian believers who practices the Spirit inspired manifestation of speaking in tongues. For my life speaking in tongues is a wonderful blessing and a precious gift. Though speaking in tongues has suffered a great deal of criticism from both scholars as well as the church at large, this is really no wonder. Anything (especially a spiritual phenomenon) which begins to raise eyebrows tends to draw a quick and terminating blow from those who wish that things be left the way they are. God however has been the instigating force from the beginning of the Christian church in inspiring this great gift and the same is true today.

It is my conviction that the Bible has plenty to say in favor of this manifestation of God's Spirit. And, I also would go so far as to say that the Bible has nothing at all demeaning to say about speaking in tongues - as long as it is done in a "fitting and orderly way". Speaking in tongues is a gift from God and should not only be allowed but expected where there are believers.

Unfortunately, misconceptions about speaking in tongues abound. Many people have learned what they know about speaking in tongues from the charismatic and sometimes frenzied Pentecostal type churches in which this manifestation of the Spirit has come to light. Based on some of the stories that I have heard and read as well as experiences I have had in certain of these churches I can sympathize with those who would rather this gift be left a mystery. Speaking in tongues has traditionally been associated with churches that also carry out such unbiblical practices as being slain in the spirit, snake handling, uncontrollable laughing and shouting as well as other "strange" happenings. It is not my concern, however, to speak about the misconceptions but rather to examine some of what the Bible itself has to say about this gift and hopefully in the process make clear the fallacy of some of these misunderstandings.

Speaking in Tongues in Acts

The book of Acts contains three records (Acts 2:4, 10:44-46, 19:5-6) in which Christian believers spoke in tongues. By reading over these records in context and drawing out a few points we can get some good ideas of what speaking in tongues meant for the first century believers. In Acts chapter 2 we find a group of believers including the twelve apostles gathered in celebration of the Feast of Pentecost. Not long before this Jesus had been crucified and raised from the dead. What was probably most fresh in their minds was his instructions to them after he had been raised from the dead about what to do once he was "taken up to heaven". Acts 1:4 records some instructions he gave them at this time, "On one occasion while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" It is in Acts 2 that we find this promise fulfilled.

When the day of Pentecost came they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?...we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?'" (Acts 2:1-12)

Then Peter gives the explanation,

*This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:
'In the last days, God says, I will pour out
my Spirit on all people...'*

So here where we find the first record of believers speaking in tongues it is clearly understood to be evidence that the promised holy Spirit has been given to the believers in Jesus Christ. The followers of Jesus had received God's Spirit and the reason the people around them knew it was because they were speaking in tongues. Something else which is important to note is that the crowd that came together in bewilderment described this speaking in tongues as "declaring the wonders of God".

The next time we run across speaking in tongues explicitly being mentioned in the Book of Acts is when Peter is visiting the centurion Cornelius. Peter, in opposition to the Jewish regulations of his time, goes to visit this gentile family in response to a vision he has received. In verse 42 of chapter 10 Peter is in the middle of laying out the "good news of peace through Jesus Christ":

'He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

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 (Acts10:42-46).

Here again we find speaking in tongues as the evidence of people receiving the holy Spirit. Later as Peter is reporting to the brothers back in Jerusalem he explains what happened at Cornelius' house like this:

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 without 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? (Acts 11:15-18).

Again it was by the speaking in tongues that Peter and the other circumcised believers knew that the gentiles had been accepted by God and given His Spirit.

Acts 19:1-7 is the last time in Acts that speaking in tongues is recorded. Paul is coming into Ephesus and he runs across 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. There were about twelve men in all."

Here again the believers speak in tongues when they receive the holy Spirit. In all three of the examples in Acts when people speak in tongues it is the evidence that they have received the holy Spirit and are accepted by God.

Speaking in Tongues in I Corinthians

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains a great deal of information about speaking in tongues. However, we need a little background information on the church in Corinth before we can understand some of the things Paul has to say about speaking in tongues in chapters 12-14. In these chapters Paul is probably addressing some abuses in regards to speaking in tongues as well as other abuses which caused confusion and disorder in the Corinthian church.. His greatest concern for the believers in Corinth is that when they come together they be edified,

Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church (14:12).

Paul stresses the importance of diversity within the local group of believers which is the body of Christ in that region:

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many (12:14).

God has arranged the (different) parts in the body just as he wanted them to be (12:18).

(the different) ... parts should have equal concern for each other (12:25).

He also explains that the only way in which the church will be edified and the different members of the body will contribute to the well being of the whole is if they exercise their spiritual gifts in love (Ch. 13). Now that we have seen some of the goals Paul has in addressing the Corinthian church we will be better able to understand some of his comments to them about speaking in tongues.

To begin with, in chapter 12 Paul lists speaking in tongues as a manifestation or evidence of the Spirit in one's life. This is in complete agreement with what we learn from the Book of Acts, but Paul has more to say about the matter.

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. 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. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 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 (14:1-5).

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. 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; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. 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. You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue (14:12-19).

In all of these verses Paul is speaking about what should go on as they gather for fellowship. Paul is not concerned that there are those that speak in tongues. In fact, Paul desires that *all* of them speak in tongues (vs. 5) because he himself knows what a great blessing it is (vs. 4, 18). What Paul is saying is that speaking in tongues in the gathered assembly without an interpretation of what you are saying to God is not useful for building the others up that are present because they cannot tell what the speaker is saying. This is his main concern in this section. He ends by encouraging them

... do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything must be done in a fitting and orderly way (vs. 39-40).

It is obvious throughout I Corinthians that those who speak in tongues are in total control of this manifestation of the Spirit. They can speak in tongues at will and they can refrain from doing so as well. The Spirit does not "take them over" and force them to do anything. This is precisely why Paul can give them instructions about the proper use of this manifestation. Godly order is not achieved when the church gathers and people speak in tongues without an interpretation of what they are saying. Therefore, unless they interpret what they have spoken in tongues they should remain silent in the church fellowship.

So then, the manifestation of the Spirit, speaking in tongues, is desirable for one's life if it is used properly. This would include the speaker speaking by himself in order to praise God with the Spirit because this brings needed edification to the individual himself. This would also include

speaking in tongues in the gathered assembly if there is an interpretation so that the church may be edified as well.

So, as we have seen from all of these sections of scripture speaking in tongues does not seem to be the exception in the first century church. Instead, speaking in tongues was widespread in the early church and was clearly considered to be evidence of the giving of God's Spirit to his people. Speaking in tongues is also desirable within the parameters of decency and orderliness because it is edifying for the

individual who speaks to God with prayer and praise in the Spirit. In summary, for anyone who has not experienced this manifestation of the Spirit the New Testament serves as a guide showing that it is available to those with the Spirit and that it is also a great blessing to their lives. To those who have experienced this gift the New Testament serves as a guide to how it is to be properly manifested both in one's private prayer life as well as within the church fellowship.