

γλωσσοα

TONGUES

by Grant Steidl

γλωσσοα, ης, η, **glōssa**

(1) *the tongue*, Mar. vii.

33,35; 1 Jn. iii. 18;

(2) *a language*, Ac. ii. 11;

(3) *a nation or people distinguished by their language*, Rev. v. 9, vii. 9.

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Should We Be Speaking In Tongues?

This question confronts Christians today as it never did before, because the tongues movement has long since burst its confinement in Pentecostal circles and has infiltrated to nearly every segment of professing Christendom.

Because it lacks any organizational structure or uniformity in principle and practice, the tongues movement is not easy to define. Adherents at its fanatical fringe believe that speaking in tongues (that is, using sounds that are unintelligible to others) is the only valid evidence to prove that one has received the Holy Spirit. They also believe that those who do not so speak in tongues are not Christians in the full sense of the word. More moderate spokesmen believe that tongues-speaking is only one of the spiritual gifts – and therefore not to be expected in the experience of every Christian.

In all fairness, it should be stated that the vast majority of tongues-speakers claim allegiance to Jesus Christ as Savior, and to the Bible as the inspired Word of God. However, adherents can be found in the Roman Catholic as well as in liberal Protestant churches, and even in some non-Christian religions. Sometimes people without any regard for God or religion can be found pursuing psychic sensations through an experience of tongues.

A wide range of opinion and attitude can also be found among those who oppose the tongues movement. Some psychologists feel that the practice of tongues tends to emotional disorders and even breakdowns. Among evangelical Christians there are frequently conflicting feelings towards tongues. Sometimes it is ridicule. Sometimes it is fear. And sometimes there arise secret nagging questions in the heart: "Am I missing out on a vital part of Christian experience? Am I lacking the fullness of the Holy Spirit in my life?"

Some Christians are convinced that much of the contemporary tongues-speaking results from the activity of Satan and his agents. One writer calls it, "A new movement of Satanic deception ... the self-conscious self takes over and substitutes cheap excitement for real spiritual values. A love of psychic thrills is thus substituted for research in the Word of God and this stunts growth into maturity."*

Of vital importance to every Christian who desires to know and follow the Word of God is the question, "To what extent (if any) is the experience of supernatural tongues as recorded in the Bible comparable to its experience by devotees of the contemporary tongues movement?" To answer this question we must carefully consider and compare those Scriptures which treat this subject.

***The Tongues Movement**, D.S., Good Tidings Publishers (out of print).

The Reason For Tongues

Let's begin this study by quoting the only verse in the entire Bible which specifically tells the reason for the gift of tongues: "Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers." (1 Cor. 14:22). We shall consider this verse in some detail later. For now I only invite you to keep it in mind as we consider the various references to tongues in the New Testament. You will be thrilled with the beauty and accuracy of the Word of God as you see how all these references fit together. In every case recorded, the gift of tongues provided a sign to unbelievers.

The Definition Of Tongues

Just one more thing. The meaning of the word "tongues" as used in Scriptures comes from the Greek word *glossa*, a word which can refer to three things in the English language: (1) the tongue as an organ of speech, as in Mark 7:33; (2) a language, as in Revelation 5:9; (3) the supernatural gift of speaking another language without having learned it academically, as in 1 Corinthians 12:10.* Obviously, in this booklet we will be dealing with the third meaning of tongues as it occurs in the following Scriptures.

***Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words**, W.E. Vine; Oliphants, London, England.

Tongues In The Acts

“They will speak with new tongues.”

After giving to His disciples the “Great Commission” to preach and baptize in all the world, the Lord Jesus spoke of certain signs which would follow those who believed. One of these signs was, “They will speak with new tongues.” In other words, they would be given the power to speak languages which they had not learned academically.

The early chapters of Acts record the special signs by which God bore witness to the apostles as they began spreading the Gospel, especially among the Jews. He validated that little band of “ignorant and unlearned men” as the ones by whom He was introducing something new into the midst of a hostile world. The old wine of Judaism was being replaced by the new wine of Christianity (Lk. 5:36-39). By means of signs God put His stamp of judgment on the former and of approval on the messengers of the latter.

Hebrews 2:3-4 makes it clear that God validated the messengers, not the message, by means of signs. The message of the Gospel needs no authentication (neither then nor now) being itself “... the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes ...” (Rom. 1:16).

Acts 2:1-12

“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

On the day of Pentecost the Spirit of God came down and baptized all the believers into one body according to the promise of Christ. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues. As a result of this special sign, Jews out of every nation under heaven were amazed as they heard the disciples speaking their languages. They asked, “Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own tongues in which we were born?” (Acts 2:7-8) Peter seized the occasion to preach the Gospel and 3,000 believed.

Did you catch that? Those who heard the disciples speak in tongues heard them speak understandable words in their own languages. It was not unintelligible gibberish. This is always the case with biblical tongues. When we understand this, we will not waste time and energy trying desperately to do something which God never intended His people to do. Rather, we can concentrate on studying the Bible and getting to know our blessed Lord better.

Note also that the record does not say that those who spoke in tongues preached the Gospel, nor that Peter preached in a special

tongue. God simply used this occasion to validate His servants with the sign of tongues to these Jews. This harmonizes perfectly with Mark 16:17, Hebrews 2:3,4 and 1 Corinthians 14:22.

Acts 2:41-47

“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized ... And they continued steadfastly.”

There is no mention that the 3,000 Jews who believed on this occasion spoke in tongues, although they did a number of other things which indicate spiritual growth and joy in the Lord. The same can be said of the 5000 who believed in Acts 4:4. Later on, in verse 31 of that same chapter when the disciples “prayed ... and were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness,” no mention is made of speaking in tongues.

Proceeding on to the believers added to the Lord in Acts 5:14, to the multiplication of disciples in Acts 6:7, and to the Eunuch from Ethiopia in Acts 8:26-40, the same is true. We find no evidence that any of them spoke in tongues.

Acts 9:1-22

“Receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

The conversion of the apostle Paul deserves special mention. The Word does not say that he

spoke with tongues on that occasion although his eyes received sight and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. From 1 Corinthians 14:8 we learn that Paul did speak in tongues, but we shall look at that later. In Acts 9:42, no record is given that those who believed in the Lord at Joppa spoke in tongues, although the raising of Dorcas from the dead evidently had a great impact on them.

Power In Acts 1-9

Have you noticed that in the first nine chapters of Acts, speaking in tongues is mentioned in only one incident in chapter two? On many occasions the Gospel had been preached in power! People trusted Christ and were filled with the Holy Spirit. The assembly of God's people grew tremendously as they experienced:

- *Power* in fellowship (Acts 2:46-47),
- *Power* in prayer (Acts 4:23-31),
- *Power* in problem solving (Acts 7:1-7),
- *Power* in witnessing (Acts 8:4-5),
- *Power* in practical walk (Acts 9:31).

And they experienced all this without tongues!

How sad that some Christians today seem unaware of these simple Scriptures, and are convinced that they cannot experience spiritual power in their lives until they have spoken in tongues. To all such I would humbly say: abide in Christ and you will bear much fruit; for your strength is in Him, not in experiences. Without Him you can do nothing (see John 15:1-7).

Acts 10:34-48

“They heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.”

It is significant that the second mention in the book of Acts of believers speaking in tongues should be in this chapter. As God had used Peter on the day of Pentecost to introduce a risen and glorified Savior to the Jews, He now uses the same vessel to bring the same Savior to the Gentiles meeting in the house of Cornelius.

But why did God give tongues on this occasion? In what way was it a sign to unbelievers? First, remember that it wasn't easy for Peter to go to Gentiles. God used a special vision to break down his Jewish prejudices (read Acts 10). But “they of the circumcision” in Jerusalem hadn't seen that vision, and they contended with Peter for doing what was unlawful for a Jew to do – to go to uncircumcised people and eat with them.

However, as Peter and those who had accompanied him to the house of Cornelius explained their actions, they finished with this clincher in Acts 11:17: “If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could withstand God?”

What was the result? “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the

Gentiles repentance to life” (Acts 11:18). The wonderful sign of tongues announced to prejudiced, unbelieving minds what had already been announced on the Day of Pentecost – that God was breaking down barriers among men, reversing the sentence of Babel, bringing Jew and Gentile into one body by the cross, and thus setting aside Judaism. It yet remained for the apostle Paul to expound this precious truth in detail (see 1 Cor. 12 and Eph. 2), but the sign of tongues pointed to its coming.

Acts 13:48-52

“As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed ... and the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

The city of Antioch of Pisidia witnessed the earnest labors of Paul and Barnabas early in their first missionary journey. The Word was largely rejected by the Jews there, but several Gentiles turned to the Lord. We have no record that any of them spoke in tongues although they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s extraordinary labors during three missionary journeys stand recorded in the rest of the book of Acts. Many people are amazed to learn that none of those converted through his ministry spoke in tongues (at least we have no record of it) with one notable exception.

Acts 19:1-6

“The Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.”

The circumstances surrounding this third and final occurrence of tongues in the book of Acts is very different from the first two. Jerusalem provided the scene for Pentecost and the outpouring of tongues for a sign to the multitudes of Jews assembled there. Only a house full witnessed the second occurrence in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. Now we find ourselves in Ephesus – the renowned capitol of Asia, the home of the magnificent temple of Diana, the cosmopolitan center of commerce, religion, culture and government. Why would tongues be spoken here?

Let’s first get a little background of the work of the Lord in Ephesus. Many people responded to the Gospel there. In fact it became Paul’s home for two years, and a center from which “all who dwelt in Asia heard the Word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). It witnessed special miracles by the hands of Paul and the humiliating defeat of seven Jewish exorcists who tried to imitate the power of God through him. From it arose the smoldering flames of magic and occult books worth fifty thousand pieces of silver – burned by new converts to Christ. And from it also arose the fierce wrath of frustrated heathen silversmiths and the impassioned shrieks of a city gone mad. In it the

Word of God grew mightily and prevailed.

Isn't it amazing that with multitudes turning to the Lord and giving such evidence of true conversion, only twelve men are said to have spoken in tongues there? Let's note some things about these twelve: (1) they had been baptized with John's baptism; (2) prior to Paul's conversation they were ignorant that the Holy Spirit had been given; (3) after they were baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ, Paul laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke with tongues.

How did these twelve speaking in tongues provide a sign to unbelievers? The answer becomes clear as we think upon the entire account. In a city composed of pagan worshippers of Diana, orthodox Jews and pagans, God put his validation stamp upon twelve men who turned to Jesus Christ. He said in effect, that these men represent the only true supernaturalists. God then gave additional signs through the Apostle Paul by special miracles of healing and exorcism. The cumulative effect was powerful in establishing Christianity and nullifying both Judaism and paganism.

But is it not significant that Paul makes no mention of the importance or necessity or continuation of any of these sign gifts when he speaks to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17-35? Or when he writes the epistle to the Ephesians some years later. Rather, the Spirit of God leads him to occupy their hearts and minds with the precious things of Christ which have abiding value and

worth. The testimony of God had been established and sign gifts were no longer necessary.

Tongues in the Epistles

Only one epistle speaks of tongues, and that is Paul's first epistle to the **Corinthians**. Let's consider carefully what he has to say on this subject to those saints. Only remember that they were not Spirit-filled* model believers when Paul wrote them. The epistle is largely one of rebuke and correction because:

- They were contentious and sectarian (ch. 1:10-13).
- They were carnal and walking as men (ch. 3:1-5).
- They considered themselves wise in this world (ch. 3:18-23).
- They were puffed up, counting themselves wise and strong and honorable (ch. 4:6-21).
- They were unconcerned about terrible evil in their midst (ch. 5).
- They were suing and defrauding one another (ch. 6).
- They needed correction as to sex and marital relations (chs. 6 & 7).
- They were using knowledge in a conceited manner without regard for weaker brothers (ch. 8).
- They were in danger of spiritual fornication and idolatry (ch. 10).

*Believers are all *indwelt* by the Holy Spirit, but not always *filled* with the Spirit. Sin *grieves* the Spirit.

- They were disorderly at the Lord's Supper and as a result many among them were sick and weak, and many slept (ch. 11).

Now obviously, all of them were not guilty of all these things. But why mention these things at all? Only because this background will prove very helpful when we consider what Paul says to them on the subject of tongues in chapters 12-14. We need to understand that Paul is correcting their abuse of tongues just as he had been correcting their other abuses in the earlier chapters. But why were the Corinthians so keen on tongues when it was no issue to the Philippians, the Colossians, the Thessalonians and the multitudes of Christians in other places? The passages we are about to consider will shed light on this question.

1 Corinthians 12

“To another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.”

Let's look first at the operation of the Spirit of God in relation to spiritual manifestations, including the gift of tongues. He alone enables one to truly confess Jesus as Lord.

He gives distinctions of gifts for the common good of the body of Christ and to accomplish the purposes of God. Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 likewise teach this important truth that spiritual gifts are not given primarily for the blessing or edification or distinction of the person to whom it is given.

He gives different gifts sovereignly according to His will. Sincere people may pray and plead and tarry and even follow elaborate procedures for acquiring certain gifts, but God just doesn't give them in that way. He has in mind the body of Christ of which every Christian is a member. He sets those members in the body as it pleases Him (v. 18), and also sets gifted people in the assembly as it pleases Him (v. 28-31).

Just imagine in your own body the foot envying the eye, or the hand desiring to be an ear. Or think of certain members of your body saying to other members, "We don't need you!" What absurdity – both in the human body and in the body of Christ. We are to have care and concern for one another, and to be content with the place and sphere and gift which God has given to each of us.

Of course, we are to stir up and use the gifts God has given us as instructed in 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6. But these very instructions confirm the same point – that we have already been given that which we are enjoined to stir up and use.

1 Corinthians 12:31

"Earnestly desire the best gifts"

I can almost hear someone protesting: "But look at verse 31, where it says 'Earnestly desire the best gifts.' Doesn't this disprove all you are saying?" Not at all. The verb *desire* (or *covet*) in verse 31 can be translated in either the impera-

tive mood (as in the King James version) or in the indicative mood. If translated the latter way, it would read: "You desire earnestly the best gifts and yet I show you a more excellent way." As such, it becomes a statement of fact (and not even a complimentary one) rather than an exhortation.

This rendering fits better, I believe, into the context of all that is being taught in chapters 12 through 14. The priorities and emphasis of the Corinthians were wrong. They were carnal, divisive, self-seeking and desirous of a charismatic display of gifts and abilities. Paul says in effect, "You desire gifts, but you need love."

But even if one insists on leaving the verb "desire" in the imperative mood, the context still indicates that it be a corporate desiring of the best gifts to be manifested among them, rather than a personal desire for more and better gifts. In other words, it is not that each person should desire what God had not been pleased to give him, but that all should desire the upbuilding of the body of Christ through greater gifts being exercised among them.

To summarize then what 1 Corinthians 12 teaches about tongues:

1. It was a gift given by the Holy Spirit to some members of the body of Christ according to His will.
2. It is not the evidence that one has been baptized by the Holy Spirit since "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (v. 13).

3. All did not speak with tongues, just as all were not apostles, prophets, teachers, and so on.

1 Corinthians 13

“Love never fails.

***But whether there are ... tongues,
they will cease”***

This chapter is not a parenthetical love sonnet, incidentally tucked into this book without reference to the teachings which precede and follow it. Rather it describes love as the prime factor in our relations with one another and in our use of spiritual gifts. Tongues, prophecy, understanding of mysteries, knowledge, even faith and benevolence become hollow and worthless without love.

Just notice how the very description of love in verses 4-7 regulates the use of gifts:

“Love suffers long and is kind” – I won’t use my gifts as a hammer to pound other people into shape.

“Love does not envy” – I won’t envy the gifts which have been given to others and not to me.

“Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up” – I won’t put myself on a spiritual level above other Christians because they don’t have what I have.

“Love ... does not behave rudely” – I won’t lose emotional control of myself in my use of gifts.

“Love ... does not seek its own” – I will seek the welfare of the body of Christ rather than my own personal gain.

“Love ... is not provoked, thinks no evil” – I won’t react to the real or imagined provocations of others by ascribing wrong motives to them.

“Love ... does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth” – the truth as it is in Jesus will be the focal point of my fellowship and rejoicing with other Christians.

In verse eight Paul says tongues shall cease. Have they ceased already? We will be able to answer that question better after examining in 1 Corinthians 14 the purpose for which this gift was given. Here the emphasis is not upon when or how tongues shall cease, but rather upon the precious truth that love never fails – in contrast to failing prophecies, tongues which cease and knowledge which shall vanish away.

All that is partial in knowledge and prophecy shall be done away when that which is perfect is come. When we are with Christ in glory we shall no longer see through a glass darkly, but face to face; we shall no longer know in part, but know even as we are known. May our lives be ever more controlled and motivated by love – the greatest of those things which abide.

1 Corinthians 14

“Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers”

Various times throughout this chapter Paul contrasts tongues and prophecy, stressing the value of the latter for the people of God. Why? Because “He who prophesies speaks edification, exhortation and comfort to men ... He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself” (1 Cor. 14:2-4). Note that the gift of prophecy as used here does not refer to foretelling future events, but rather to telling forth the mind of God for the present blessing of believers.

One speaking in a tongue does not edify the church unless there is an interpreter. Likewise, praying in a tongue is of no value to those who can't understand and say “Amen.” In contrast to the foolishness of speaking words that no one understands, Paul gives some vital principles of communication which we need to heed if we desire “that the church may receive edification” (1 Cor. 14:5):

1. give a certain sound (v. 7,8);
2. use words easy to be understood (v. 9);
3. use words that are meaningful (v.11).

Finally, Paul contrasts tongues and prophecy in relation to the purpose for which each was given. The first is a sign to unbelievers, the other for the edification of believers. This seems simple and clear enough, and will become more so when we look at it in a little more detail.

The Purpose of Tongues

Keeping before us Paul's exhortation in verse 20 – "In malice be babes, but in understanding be mature" – let's attempt an understanding and non-malicious look at verses 21 and 22. Verse 21 contains a quotation from Isaiah 28 which is vital to understanding the purpose of tongues: "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." So there were tongues-speakers in Isaiah's day! Who were they and why did they speak in tongues?

God had used various means to speak to His people, Israel, but they would not listen. He spoke patiently to them "precept upon precept and line upon line" that they might enter into the rest and refreshment He had in mind for them. But they would not hear. Therefore, God used the tongue of another people to speak to them – the tongue of the Assyrians who would invade them and desolate their land. When they began to hear this strange tongue in their fields and villages and cities, they would know that judgment was near.

Now look again at 1 Corinthians 14:22: "Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers." As the strange tongue of the Assyrians was a sign from God to tell Israel of coming judgment in Isaiah's day, so the new tongues of the disciples of Christ became a sign to Israel of coming judgment

upon their nation in the apostolic era. And did judgment come? History records the terrible destruction of Jerusalem by the legions of Titus in 70 A.D. The sign of tongues to unbelievers was perfectly fulfilled just as it had been perfectly fulfilled in Isaiah's day. Indeed, "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

Summary

Now let's review and summarize what the Word of God says about tongues in the light of the stated purpose for which it was given. In so doing let's attempt to answer the question posed at the beginning, "Should we be speaking in tongues?"

Now we can understand Paul's insistence that tongues are not primarily for use in the assembly of the saints. And that if any one did speak there in a tongue which no one understood there must be an interpreter present.

Now we can readily see how Paul spoke in tongues more than they all (1 Cor. 14:18). As the great missionary apostle whose usual practice was to go first to the Jews in every city, he was evidently much used of God in providing this sign among them.

Now Paul's reproof of those who misunderstood and misused tongues becomes clear. Whether they sought to acquire and use it for self-edification, self-display, speaking mysteries, or just to have an ecstatic spiritual high, they were abusing it. All spiritual gifts must be used accord-

ing to the purpose for which God gave them. And God gave tongues as a sign to unbelievers.

Now we can understand why Paul said, “do not forbid to speak with tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39). This was a word of caution to those who might react against the abuse of tongues by campaigning to stop even the legitimate use of this gift. Until God’s judgment fell upon Israel in 70 A.D. as noted above, tongues would continue to be a sign to unbelievers of that impending judgment.

Now we can understand the three occurrences of tongues in the book of Acts. There were undoubtedly other occasions when God gave this sign, but He has been pleased to record only these three:

- One in the center of Judaism at Jerusalem (Acts 2).
- One with reference to the introduction of Christianity (as bringing Jew and Gentile into one body) and the consequent setting aside of Judaism (Acts 10:11).
- One in cosmopolitan Ephesus, perhaps as representative of how God gave this sign to unbelievers scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

Conclusion

The limited prominence given to tongues in the book of Acts harmonizes perfectly with that of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. It was an important gift of the Spirit as a sign to unbelievers; but definitely not the all-important evidence

of the Holy Spirit in a believer; nor an experience to be coveted by those seeking spiritual power or self-edification. As we consider what God has revealed about tongues in His precious Word, let's just praise Him that He has told us what we need to know and omitted what we don't need to know.

Is then the gift of tongues for today? I believe the Scriptures we have considered would indicate that they are not. On the other hand, God is sovereign in the means He chooses to use in accomplishing His purposes. He is not limited by our limited knowledge and experience. If He should choose to give the legitimate gift of tongues (not unintelligible gibberish) to a particular person in a given situation, that is His prerogative.

My earnest desire for those who have been troubled by this question is expressed in Colossians 2:6-10:

“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.”

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