

Is Speaking in Tongues for Today?

Q. Do you believe that speaking in tongues continues today?

A. Thank you for your question about speaking in tongues, also called glossolalia. To answer your question directly, I do not believe that what the Bible means by speaking in tongues is still done today.

There are two common misconceptions people have about speaking in tongues: 1) Speaking in tongues in the Bible is speaking in the language of angels or some other language that no people on earth normally know, and 2) The same gift of speaking in tongues we read of in the Bible continues today.

The Bible reveals that these ideas are in error.

1. The Bible does not say that speaking in tongues was speaking in the language of angels. In fact, it says that speaking in tongues was speaking in known, earthly languages. Speaking in tongues was a miraculous gift from God (1 Corinthians 12). God first gave it on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. It was not the most important of the gifts (1 Corinthians 14:5). Yet it was a gift that enabled a person to speak in a known, earthly language that the person had not been taught (Acts 2:8-11). When Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:1, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal," he was using hyperbole. In other words, he was saying that, although he had the gift of tongues and even if he were to speak in the languages of angels, if he didn't have love, it would be no better than the sounds of a cymbal. He was not speaking literally but merely trying to show the importance of love. Notice that in verse 2, he says, "and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains...." There is nothing in the Bible that indicates that Paul had the faith to move mountains. Again, he was using hyperbole just as he had in the preceding verse. Thus,

the idea that speaking in tongues is speaking in the language of angels has no biblical support.

Some point to Mark 16:17 as evidence that Christians are to speak with tongues that have never been spoken on earth before. It says, "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues." The word "new" is translated from the Greek word *kainais*. The emphasis of this word is not freshness, as newly made. There is another word in Greek—*neos*—that has that meaning. Rather, "new" in Mark 16:17 refers to the fact the language will be new to the speaker, one he has not used before. It does not imply that the language would be new on the face of the earth. This Scripture was foretelling the tongues speaking of Acts 2.

2. Speaking in tongues has ceased. In 1 Corinthians 13:8-10, Paul, in emphasizing the eternity of love points out that the gift of receiving prophecy from God, the gift of speaking in tongues, and the gift of receiving knowledge from God will end. He says this will happen when that which is perfect is come. The Greek word translated "perfect" here is *teleios*. It means "complete." Something has reached its perfection when it is complete. What Paul is referring to is the canonization of Scripture. Once God put all of the knowledge He wanted the church to have into the church through the gifts of knowledge, tongues, and prophecy—and all of this was recorded in Scripture—then He stopped giving those gifts. Tongues were only for the period of transition from the Old to the New Covenant, they were a witness against unbelievers, and were the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies foretelling the divine judgment against the Jews as He turned from them to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 14:21-22; Isaiah 28:11-13). Tongues, as well as the gifts of knowledge and prophecy, have ceased.

I am not saying that God does not continue to work in ways that we would consider to be supernatural. I know that He does. For example, God heals, and He even on occasion does other things that we commonly call miracles. But He does these things as acts of mercy, not to add knowledge to the revelation of the Bible or to witness to unbelievers. But, as I have said, tongues was a way of adding revealed knowledge, witnessing to unbelievers, and witnessing against the Jews at a time when God was turning from them as a nation and to the Gentiles. Thus, tongues is among those gifts that have ceased. Therefore, according to evidence from the Bible, the gift of tongues ended a long time ago. This biblical evidence is what is important. What follows is not biblical evidence, but it is based on the biblical

evidence that modern tongues-speaking is not the same as the tongues-speaking in the Bible.

So, then, what is taking place in Pentecostal, charismatic, and other churches that claim to still have the gift of tongues? I do not want to hurt anyone's feelings or cause anyone to be angry. Nevertheless, since the Bible tells us that speaking in tongues was speaking in known languages and that this gift has ceased, I believe that what is today practiced as the gift of tongues is a deception. The "tongues" spoken are not known languages. They are simply nonsense. Similar phenomena of speaking in gibberish occur in the religious rites of non-Christian religions, such as Paganism, Shamanism, Spiritism, and Voodoo.

Linguists have studied glossolalia on a number of occasions. Their findings are quite revealing. One wrote that glossolalia is "only a façade of language" (William J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism*. Macmillan, New York, 1972, 128). They have found that speaking in tongues is a learned behavior, and that tongues-speaking congregations imitate the particular glossolalia style of their leaders, or will even take on the style of prominent visiting speakers (Samarin, 73; Virginia H. Hine: "Pentecostal Glossolalia toward a Functional Interpretation." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 8, 2: [1969] 211-226: quote on 211; Nicholas P. Spanos, Wendy P. Cross, Mark Lepage, Marjorie Coristine: "Glossolalia as learned behavior: An experimental demonstration." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*: 1986 Feb Vol 95[1] 21-23). Researchers have even found that activity in the language centers of people while they are speaking in tongues decreases and activity in the emotional centers increases (Andrew Newberg, Nancy Wintering and Donna Morgan: "Cerebral blood flow during the complex vocalization task of glossolalia," *J Nucl Med. Meeting Abstracts* 2006; 47 [Supplement 1]:316P; *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, Volume 148, Issue 1, 22 November 2006, 67-71).

A psychological anthropologist and linguist studied tongues-speaking in several Pentecostal groups in the United States, the Caribbean, and Mexico. The normal language of these people included English, Spanish, and Mayan. Comparing the tongues-speaking of these people with recordings of non-Christian rituals in Africa, Borneo, Indonesia, and Japan, she concluded that there is no distinction between Christian tongues-speaking and that of the followers of other religions (Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study in Glossolalia*. University of Chicago Press, 1972).

Certainly this is weighty evidence that modern tongues-speaking is not a gift of the Holy Spirit and has nothing to do with the speaking in

tongues mentioned in the Bible. As such, it must be admitted to be a delusion or deception, and it cannot be considered to be harmless. It is absolutely not wrong to test the spirits, and, in fact, we are commanded to do so (1 John 4:1) and the implication is that we are to reject what is not from God. If today's speaking in tongues is not from God, and I believe that both biblical and non-biblical evidence shows that it is not, then it must be rejected. Those who ignore this do so at the peril of opening themselves up to even greater deception.

Peter Ditzel