

Tongues?

How is the Holy Spirit working in churches today? Is He using the gift of tongues today among His people? Is He giving Christians the ability to speak in supernatural languages? Or is this gift confined to the past, to the time when the New Testament was being written and living apostles taught and governed in the churches? Many in the Pentecostal movement say that it is a valuable help to their prayer life, others say it is a sign of being baptized in the Holy Spirit, and still others say it does not exist today because it is a form of verbal revelation from God that is ended when the New Testament writings were completed.

In all the confusion, the Bible gives us answer when it is rightly divided. The gift of tongues was a God-given ability to speak in a human language that had not been learned by the one speaking, not mystical, alien language. The first use of tongues makes it clear that the gift of tongues was actually a gift of languages. It's first use is displayed in Acts 2:1-13 at Pentecost. For the first time the Holy Spirit came in a dramatic way to indwell every believer. At this point the speakers were "filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled" (v.4). Jews from all the nations had assembled to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem, as part of observing the Jewish religious calendar (v5). As the believers were speaking, each pilgrim Jew in the crowd recognized the language or dialect from his own country (v6). The word for "language" is interpreted from the Greek word [dialektos], where we get the word dialect. Utterly amazed they spoke up and said "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans (v. 7). In other words by analogy, they were saying how is it that these believers in Peru Indiana are speaking French, German, Spanish, and many other languages that are our own dialects. Verse 8 explains their amazement, "and how is it that we each here them in our own language to which we were born? At the end of a long list of districts and regions from which these Jews had come, the same statement is mentioned again in (v. 11) "we hear them in our own tongues speaking of mighty deeds of God." There is absolutely no reason to believe that there were two types of tongues, human languages and a mystical angelic language.

Apostle Paul gives the protocol for using the gift of tongues. Contrary to the way the "gift of tongues" is used today, Paul instructed the Corinthians to speak one at a time, and only two or three were to speak in a given service (1 Cor. 14:27). Paul also gives another instruction for the gift of tongues. When used in an assembly, each use of tongues was to be interpreted by someone with the gift of interpretation so that the others might be edified by the God-inspired message. (1Cor. 14:5, 13, 27). These clear instructions tell us that the gift of tongues did not serve as a private prayer language. This gift was no different than any of the other spiritual gifts. It was to be used under God's direction to serve and edify the church, not self. (1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pet. 4:10).

The most concise teaching in the New Testament on the gift of tongues is mentioned in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. Specifically in verse 8, Paul makes an interesting statement: "Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away." In the expression "love never fails", the Greek word translated "fails" means "to deteriorate" or "do decay". Paul's primary point of this passage is to instruct his hearers about love. He teaches them that love is eternal. He declares that love is an eternal characteristic and will never be terminated. Paul says that tongues however, "will cease." The Greek verb is used in 1 Corinthians 13:8 means "to cease permanently." By using this Greek word, Paul implies that when tongues ceased, they would never start up again.

This raises a very important question for those modern day proponents of tongues. If tongues were to cease, has that already happened? If not, when in the future will they cease. There remains a great debate between those who believe tongues have already ceased and those who believe it is

yet future.

It must be admitted, that 1 Corinthians 13:8 does not specifically say when tongues will cease. Although 1 Corinthians 13:9-10 teaches that prophecy and knowledge will cease when the “perfect” (the eternal state) comes, the language of the passage, particularly the middle voice of the Greek verb translated “will cease” puts tongues into a category all by itself. In other words, though they are mentioned together, the specifics of the grammar separate them into two categories, prophecy and knowledge (first), and tongues (second).

Paul writes that while prophecy and knowledge will be “done away” with some other agent (the eternal state), tongues will “cease” in and of itself (middle voice) sometime prior to that time that “the perfect” (eternal state) arrives. In other words tongues will decrease itself like a spinning top that loses its own energy.

The question must be answered, when did tongues cease? There is enough Scriptural and historical evidence to conclude that tongues ceased to exist around the end of the apostolic age. First, the gift of tongues was a gift that should be categorized with the miraculous gifts. It is a revelatory gift that provided certain individuals with special abilities to reveal new revelation from God. This category was limited in its use and to its period in history. These special gifts ceased as the apostolic age passed away. The last recorded miracles in the New Testament occurred around A.D. 58, with the healings on the island of Malta (Acts 28:7-10). From A.D. 58-96, when John finished the book of Revelation, no miracle is recorded. Miracle gifts like tongues and healing are mentioned only in 1 Corinthians, an early epistle. Two later epistles, Ephesians and Romans, both discuss gifts of the Spirit at length, but no mention is made of the miraculous gifts. By that time miracles were already looked on as something of the past. Hebrews 2:3-4 says “how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, 4God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will. Apostolic authority and the message they brought forth need no further confirmation. Before the first century ended, the entire New Testament had been written and was circulating through the churches.

At the conclusion of the New Testament writings, the revelatory gifts had ceased to serve their intended purpose. And when the apostolic age ended with the death of Apostle John, the signs that identified the apostles had already become moot in (2 Cor. 12:12) where Paul wrote “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.”

A second observation beyond the timing, tongues were intended as a sign to unbelieving Jews as 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 states “In the Law it is written, “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,” says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers, but to those who believe. This was prophesied centuries before in Isaiah 28:11-12 “Indeed, He will speak to this people Through stammering lips and a foreign tongue, 12He who said to them, “Here is rest, give rest to the weary,” And, “Here is repose,” but they would not listen. Tongues as God intended, signified that God had begun a new work that included Gentiles. The Lord would now speak to all nations in all languages instead of to the Jews in Hebrew. The barriers were now down and so the gift of languages symbolized not only the curse of God on the disobedient nation of Israel, but also the blessing of God on the whole world. It was a blessing and a reversal of the tower of Babel. Instead of dividing nations by language, tongues signified that dawning of a new age where the gospel would do forth in language.

Tongues were therefore a sign of transition between the Old and New Covenants. With the establishment of the church, a new day had begun for the people of God. God would speak in all languages.

The purpose of all spiritual gifts is the edification of the body, not self-gratification. The gift of tongues is inferior to other gifts 1 Cor. 14:18-19. It was primarily a sign (1 Cor. 14:22) and was also easily misused to edify self (1 Cor. 14:4). Therefore, tongues has limited usefulness in the church, and so it was never intended to be a permanent gift.

Although extra-biblical evidence does not carry the same authority as Scripture, it does help to reinforce the evidence of Scripture. The evidence of history also indicates that tongues had ceased at the end of the apostolic era. Again, it is important to note that tongues are mentioned only in the earliest New Testament books. We know that Paul wrote at least twelve New Testament epistles after 1 Corinthians and never mentioned tongues again. The following New Testament writers never mentioned tongues; James, John, and Jude. Tongues only is mentioned briefly in Acts and 1 Corinthians as the new message of the gospel was being spread. But once the church was established, tongues were gone. They stopped. The later books of the New Testament do not mention tongues again, and neither did anyone in the post-apostolic age.

Chrysostom and Augustine, the greatest theologians of the eastern and western churches, considered tongues obsolete. Writing in the fourth century, Chrysostom stated categorically that tongues had ceased by his time and described the gift as obscure practice. Augustine referred to tongues as a sight that was adopted to the apostolic age. In fact, during the first five hundred years of the church, the only people who claimed to have spoken in tongues were followers of Montanus, who was branded as a heretic.

The next time any significant tongues-speaking movement arose within Christianity was in the late seventeenth century. A group of protestants in the Cevennes region of southern France began to prophecy, experience visions, and speak in tongues. The group, sometimes called the Cevenol prophets, is remembered for its political and military activities, not its spiritual legacy. Most of their prophecies were unfulfilled. They were rabidly anti-Roman Catholic, and advocated the use of armed force against the Roman Catholic church. Many of them were constantly persecuted and killed by Rome.

Another group that practiced a form of tongues was the Shakers, an American sect with Quaker roots that flourished in the mid-1700s. Mother Ann Lee, founder of the sect, regarded herself as the female equivalent of Jesus Christ. She claimed to be able to speak in seventy-two languages. The Shakers believed sexual intercourse was sinful, even within marriage. They spoke in tongues while dancing and singing in a trancelike state.

Then in the early nineteenth century, Scottish Presbyterian pastor Edward Irving and members of his congregation practiced speaking in tongues and prophesying. Irvingite prophets often contradicted each other, their prophecies failed to come to pass, and their meetings were characterized by wild excesses. The movement was further discredited when some of their prophets admitted to falsifying prophecies and others even attributed their "giftedness" to evil spirits. This group eventually became the Catholic Apostolic Church, which taught many false doctrines, embracing several Roman Catholic doctrines and creating twelve apostolic offices.

We must conclude that tongues as practiced today is not the tongues of the New Testament. From the end of the apostolic era to the beginning of the twentieth century there were no genuine occurrences of the New Testament gift of tongues. They had ceased, as the Holy Spirit said they would (1

Cor. 13:8). The gift of tongues is not an authentic gift following the close of the Cannon.