

SPEAKING IN TONGUES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Speaking in tongues is a person's speaking aloud in a language unknown to him or her, usually as a part of religious prayer or worship. It is clear that the gift of tongues was given by God in the times of the NT. Many Christians today believe that we still should seek this supernatural gift in order to grow in Christian faith and love, and to praise God. Charismatic Christians believe this and other supernatural spiritual gifts are still operative in the church; cessationist Christians believe that these gifts ceased during NT times and are not presently exercised in the church. A careful study of the gift of tongues in the NT will support the cessationist position.

Occurrences of Tongues in the NT

There are only five occasions in which the NT reports that Christians spoke in tongues. All of these occurrences took place early in the history of the NT church.

1. The disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4, 11)
2. The new believers in Samaria (Acts 8:14-17); while tongues are not mentioned in particular, that seems to be indicated because the text implies that the Holy Spirit "fell upon" them¹ and states that they "received the Holy Spirit" in a visible fashion, and similar accounts in Acts mention the gift of tongues
3. The household of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:44-46); this tongue-speaking was the same gift the disciples had received on Pentecost (v. 47)
4. The believers in Ephesus when Paul arrived and taught them about Jesus (Acts 19:6)
5. The believers in Corinth after Paul had founded the church there (1 Cor 12-14)

The gift of tongues appeared in the early years of the church, along with the supernatural gifts of prophecy, casting out demons, and healing. All of these occurrences took place before or during Paul's missionary journeys and first trip to Rome. There is no NT example of speaking in tongues (or, for that matter, of prophecy or of casting out demons or of supernatural healing) from the time of Paul's first Roman imprisonment or beyond.

¹ Literally, "He *had fallen* upon none of them" (ἦν ἐπιπέπτωκος *en epipeptokos*, "had fallen upon," a periphrastic pluperfect construction). We can infer that the Holy Spirit did "fall upon" them when Peter and John placed their hands on them (v. 17).

NT Tongues Were Human Languages

It is generally agreed that the tongues spoken by the disciples on the day of Pentecost were actually human languages of the world, but languages unknown by the speakers. This fact is apparent from the context of Acts 2, where people from various nations heard the disciples speak in their own “native language” (v. 8). Apparently, many disciples were speaking at the same time, and most people thought they were babbling, since they did not know the languages of most of the speakers; this fits with the accusation that the disciples were drunk (v. 13), and yet with the fact that foreigners from various countries could understand that their own language was being spoken by at least some of the speakers.

When the Gentile convert Cornelius and his household were “speaking in tongues and praising God,” Peter said that the Lord gave them the same gift that the disciples had at Pentecost, when foreign languages were spoken (Acts 10:47). Peter repeated this fact to his friends in Jerusalem: “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning” (Acts 11:15). We can thus conclude that Cornelius and his family spoke in human languages unknown by them, just as happened during Pentecost.

It is probable that the saints in Samaria, likewise, spoke in foreign languages, as that gift is called “receiving the Holy Spirit,” identifying it with the speaking in foreign languages by the disciples on the day of Pentecost and presumably later by Cornelius and his family.²

Since the tongue-speaking that took place in the churches in Ephesus and in Corinth date from Paul’s third missionary journey, several years after the earlier occurrences mentioned in Acts, some have suggested that this gift was different in that it was not human languages, but “heavenly” languages. Some find support for this idea by several statements in 1 Corinthians. Paul speaks of “the tongues of men and of angels,”³ thus apparently allowing for “angelic” languages as a possible experience for tongue speakers. The gift may require another spiritual gift to interpret the message,⁴ perhaps indicating that it was not given in a human language. It is described as speaking “not to men but to God,” and “uttering mysteries.”⁵

Before answering these specific arguments for “angelic languages,” it should be noted that, on the face of it, the tongues spoken in Ephesus and Corinth appear to be human languages, just as they were in the book of Acts. First, the same terminology is used for the occurrences in Corinth as for those in Acts.⁶ Second, when Paul discusses tongue speaking in Corinth, he describes it in terms of human languages. He quotes from the OT.⁷ Isaiah the prophet declared that God would speak “with other tongues” to Israel, by “the lips of foreigners.” This was to be not a blessing, but a sign of a curse against the sinful Israelites. Because they rejected the words of the prophets, which they could understand, God would speak to them in a foreign language

² Acts 8:15-17.

³ 1 Cor 13:1.

⁴ 1 Cor 12:10.

⁵ 1 Cor 14:2.

⁶ For example, Acts 2:4 (ἑτέραις γλώσσαις *heterais glossais*, “with other tongues”) and 1 Cor 14:21 (ἑτερογλώσσοις, *heteroglossois*, “with other tongues”) use nearly the exactly same Greek wording—speaking in “other tongues.”

⁷ 1 Cor 14:21 quotes Isa 28:11-12; cf. Deut 28:49.

they would not understand. This was done when the Assyrians invaded the land, taking captive the northern kingdom of Israel and much of the nation of Judah. Invading soldiers spoke the human language of Aramaic, not the Hebrew spoken by the Jews of Isaiah's day.⁸ This is the reason Paul declares the hearing of an unknown tongue (without its translation) to be a sign of judgment, a "sign for unbelievers."⁹

The particular arguments for so-called "angelic" languages can be answered easily. First, the statement of Paul about speaking "with the tongues of men and angels" does not imply that he or anyone else actually spoke "in the tongues of angels." In 1 Cor 13:1-3 Paul makes a series of "if" statements, each of them being actually unrealistic:

- "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels"
- "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge"
- "If I have a faith that can move mountains"
- "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames"

Note that Paul did none of these things. He did all these things to a certain extent, but not to the extreme mentioned at the end of each clause. He did speak in the "tongues of men"; he did possess "the gift of prophecy" and had some "knowledge" of "mysteries"; he did "have faith"; he did "give to the poor" and he did suffer in "his body" for Christ. But Paul never "fathomed all mysteries and all knowledge," nor "moved mountains," nor "gave all his possessions to the poor," nor "surrendered his body to the flames." These are all examples of hyperbole—making a point by exaggeration.¹⁰ He did none of these things to the extent spoken of. In the same way this passage would lead us to believe that, while he "spoke in the tongues of men," he never "spoke in the tongues of angels." "Speaking in the tongues of angels" would be the hyperbole, the extreme extent of tongue speaking—like the other examples, an extreme he never actually reached. To apply this concept to the Corinthians, Paul uses the argument from the greater to the lesser. He recognizes that they speak with the tongues of men, but even if they spoke in the tongues of angels, they still would profit nothing without love. If that is the case, they even more certainly profit nothing without love, speaking only the tongues of men.

The other arguments for "angelic languages" are easier to answer. The fact that there was a need for a "gift of interpretation" to translate the message into the familiar language does not mean that the message was given in an "angelic" language. It may simply mean that no one present knew the specific foreign language used by the tongue speaker. That appears to be the case in Acts 2, where only the native speakers understood each of the languages spoken by the disciples that day; to the rest they appeared to be babbling, to be "drunk."¹¹ And when Paul writes that the tongue speakers were speaking "not to men but to God," and "uttering

⁸ Note the languages spoken in Isa 36:11. Aramaic was spoken also by the Babylonians who later conquered the rest of Judah (cf. Jer 5:15).

⁹ 1 Cor 14:22.

¹⁰ For many biblical examples of this figure of speech, see E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (1898; reprinted: Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1981), 423-428. Bullinger includes this particular passage under the subcategory of *hypotheses*, things "which are impossible in themselves, but are used to express the greatness of the subject spoken of" (p. 427).

¹¹ Acts 2:13, 15.

mysteries,”¹² he means that God understood them, but the people did not understand. The “mysteries” spoken were things previously unknown, but now revealed by the Spirit of God. When the interpretation was given, people understood the message; and the message itself was something revealed by God. In that sense, tongue speaking was a subset of prophecy. In fact, Peter referred to tongue speaking as “prophecy” when he quoted the OT to identify what was happening on the day of Pentecost.”¹³

Cessation of Supernatural Spiritual Gifts in the NT

While supernatural spiritual gifts are fairly common in the earlier parts of the NT,¹⁴ there is not a single reference to any of them in writings from later times of the NT—Paul’s Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians), Paul’s Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, Titus, 2 Timothy), the Epistles of Peter and of John, or the book of Hebrews. The few times miracles are mentioned in the book of Revelation are either speaking of past miracles or of future miracles that are associated with the events of last days; they are not attributed to the church of the time John was writing¹⁵ (the gift of tongues is not mentioned at all in Revelation).

When writing to the churches in Ephesus, Colossae, and Philippi, Paul was a prisoner in Rome. Unlike the earlier days, the Lord did not miraculously deliver him from prison. Rather, Paul exercised his Christian and apostolic office in that situation. He even mentioned that he was anxious about the health of Epaphroditus, whom the Philippians had sent to him, because he had been so ill he almost died; while he undoubtedly prayed for him, he was not able simply to heal him miraculously.¹⁶ He told the people in the churches that they needed to live consistent Christian lives, and to be faithful in their various vocations. Nowhere did he encourage them to prophesy, speak in tongues, or perform other miraculous works.

To confirm the cessation of these supernatural gifts in the NT church, one need only consult the Pastoral Epistles of Paul. During this later period of his life Paul was unable to heal Trophimus, and had to leave him behind in the city of Miletus.¹⁷ In these three letters Paul taught, admonished, and encouraged Timothy and Titus as they led the churches in Ephesus and in Crete. Paul wrote ninety imperative verbs in these books; they cover all important aspects of the minister’s life and ministry in the church.¹⁸ Never once in all these instructions does he say the minister should exercise these gifts, or should encourage his people to do so. He makes no provision for them. On the other hand, repeatedly he tells them to teach the Scriptures, cultivate

¹² 1 Cor 14:2.

¹³ Acts 2:18 quotes Joel 2:28; both the Greek of Acts and the Hebrew of Joel use the verb “to prophesy.” Thus for Peter, “to speak in tongues” equals “to prophesy”; only the language is different.

¹⁴ NT books either written before Paul’s Roman imprisonment or dealing with events during that earlier time of NT history are the following: the Gospels, Acts, James, Jude, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. All NT accounts of supernatural spiritual gifts being exercised at that time are limited to these books.

¹⁵ Past miracles in Rev 18:20; future miracles in Rev 11:10.

¹⁶ Phil 2:25-28.

¹⁷ 2 Tim 4:20.

¹⁸ These imperative verbs are discussed in John A. Battle, “Pastoral Imperatives: Paul’s Use of the Imperative Mood in His Letters to Timothy and Titus,” *WRS Journal* 12:2 (Aug 2005) 12-18.

Christian virtues, warn against immorality and heresy, and lead the people as an example and a teacher.

Reading carefully the epistles of Peter and of John, as well as the book of Hebrews, we look in vain for any miraculous works going on.¹⁹ The writers themselves are subject to the normal human frailties and limitations. They do not expect or encourage those to whom they are writing to exercise supernatural gifts. The Christians who received those letters were never expected to possess supernatural spiritual gifts, and they received no instructions about them. In the many exhortations to the believers these books address, there is no mention of seeking supernatural gifts such as healing, prophecy, or tongues. Again, as with Paul, the Christians are to use their ordinary powers in the service of Christ, strengthened and enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Since all the supernatural spiritual gifts ceased in the apostolic period, it is apparent that supernatural speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues were included in that category and were among those gifts no longer exercised.

Purpose of Tongues in the NT

God had important reasons for giving supernatural spiritual gifts to the Christians in NT times. These gifts included miracles, healings, raising the dead, casting out demons, and prophecy, as well as speaking in tongues. Not all these signs needed be present in any one person. The NT specifies two reasons for these gifts, both of which are limited to the times of the initiation of the new dispensation under the apostles.

The first purpose of these gifts was to certify or accredit Jesus, the apostles, and the early evangelists as spokesmen for God. Jesus said that the miracles he did bore witness to who he was.²⁰ Since God gave these miraculous signs to him, the people should receive his teaching as being from God.

The apostles likewise were given these supernatural gifts in order to prove their authority to speak for God. Paul reinforced his authority among the Corinthian Christians by reminding them that, “truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.”²¹ The book of Hebrews, apparently written by a disciple of Paul, refers to this important purpose of miraculous gifts:

“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard him, God also bearing

¹⁹ It is important that the term “miracle” or “miraculous” refers to events that are in some way contrary to the laws of nature, and that these are limited to the physical realm. When Christians pray for God to heal someone today, he often answers with remarkable providences that may appear “miraculous” in a general sense; but the gift of healing, as such, is not now exercised in the church. Likewise, God still regenerates and sanctifies human hearts—that is a supernatural spiritual work, not a physical work, and is not normally considered a “miracle” for purposes of this discussion.

²⁰ John 5:36; Peter made the same conclusion about Jesus from his miracles (Acts 2:22).

²¹ 2 Cor 12:12.

witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will?”²²

Note that “gifts of the Holy Spirit” are included in this list of signs. The author does not claim these signs for himself or for those to whom he is writing; rather, he attributes them to “those who heard” the Lord—that is, the early apostles and evangelists.

Not only did Jesus and the apostles exercise these gifts to show their authority from God, but other early church leaders, often called evangelists, had the same authenticating gifts given to them. The NT mentions two men in particular in this regard. Stephen, the early deacon and first Christian martyr, is described as a man “full of faith and power,” who “did great wonders and signs among the people.” Because of these supernatural signs “they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.”²³ Likewise, Philip the deacon and evangelist exercised these gifts, gifts used to bring the Samaritans to faith: “And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did.”²⁴

Not only did the supernatural spiritual gifts authenticate God’s spokesmen, but prophesying and speaking in tongues in particular had a second important purpose. The giving of these signs to the first Christians—Jews, Samaritans, God-fearing Gentiles, and formerly pagan Gentiles—proved that these groups were now a part of the church of Jesus Christ, the new Israel of God. Peter said that the Pentecostal gift of tongues was spoken of by Joel the prophet: “in the last days, says God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy . . .”²⁵ While Joel did not mention tongues explicitly, Peter included the tongue-speaking as a type of prophecy. Joel’s prophecy views the coming of the glorious kingdom of God. Peter understood these signs as the evidence that the kingdom promises were now given to those with these signs, and were now offered to the Jews in Jerusalem—

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.²⁶

The promised kingdom was offered first to the Jews. While many thousands believed, the majority of the nation, together with its leaders, rejected the gospel and persecuted the apostles. Jesus had predicted this rejection, and the consequent destruction of Jerusalem in the near future.²⁷

As the Lord had instructed the disciples, the gospel was to go forth not only in Jerusalem, but into Judea, Samaria, and the Gentile nations.²⁸ This was accomplished historically because

²² Heb 2:3-4.

²³ Acts 6:8, 10.

²⁴ Acts 8:6.

²⁵ Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28.

²⁶ Acts 3:19-21.

²⁷ E.g., Luke 21:24.

²⁸ Acts 1:8.

the Jews as a nation rejected the message of Jesus, forcing the early believers to scatter, taking the gospel with them.²⁹ At each new stage in the expansion of the gospel there is mention of the new believers' speaking in tongues. Note the following cultural groups from which these believers came:

<i>Reference</i>	<i>Cultural Group(s)</i>
Acts 2	Palestinian & Foreign Jews
Acts 8	Samaritans
Acts 10-11	God-fearing Gentiles
Acts 19	Jews & Pagan Gentiles in Asia Minor
1 Cor 12-14	Jews & Pagan Gentiles in Greece

By granting the gift of prophecy and tongues to converts from these groups, God was demonstrating to them and to the church as a whole that they were included in the promised kingdom—that they were heirs with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the promises made to Israel, that the church was one in Jesus Christ. The church was truly universal. This second purpose of the miraculous signs, especially tongue-speaking, was asserted long ago by Augustine:

In the earliest times, “the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spoke with tongues,” which they had not learned, “as the Spirit gave them utterance.” These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away.³⁰

Both purposes—to accredit God’s spokesmen and to unify all cultural groups in the church—were fulfilled by the end of Paul’s ministry. The church was soon to have the completed canon of Scripture, and the Jewish and Gentiles believers recognized each other as fellow members of Christ’s body. Therefore, the purposes of these gifts had been met, and the gifts were no longer necessary. It was now God’s purpose that the church should grow in knowledge and faith using the ordinary means used by the Holy Spirit: the Scriptures, the sacraments, and prayer.

Conclusion

The gift of tongues was a kind of the more general gift of prophecy. Instead of giving the message from God in the common language of that place, specially gifted individuals gave that message in another human language, unknown to them. It was the duty of others to translate that message so that all could understand. The translator either knew the language, or had a comparable spiritual gift to translate it. All indications in the NT point to the language of the tongue to be a human language.

The first purpose of divinely given supernatural gifts in general was to validate the message of the new covenant and accredit the spokesman. A second purpose of these signs, and

²⁹ Acts 8:3-4; the theological significance of this movement is asserted by Paul in Rom 11:11-12, 17.

³⁰ *Homilies on the Epistles of St. John*, 6:10 (NPNF, 1st Series 7:497-498).

of prophecy and tongue-speaking in particular, was to demonstrate that each new cultural group was accepted by God into the church, the one body of Christ, and had a right to the privileges and an interest in the promises of the new covenant. No longer were these promises reserved exclusively for Jews and proselytes to Judaism.

The purposes of the supernatural gifts have been fulfilled. While no one can limit what God can do, or will do in the future when Christ returns, it is apparent that, from the time of the beginning and initial growth of the Christian church until now, God has chosen to use the ordinary means of grace to call out and sanctify his church. We should not be seeking these supernatural gifts, but rather should be content with the marvelous spiritual blessings now available to us in Christ.