

Biblical Teachings Regarding the Gift of Tongues and Glossolalia

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The First Pentecost Day:

On the first Feast of Weeks festival (which came 50 days after a starting point during the Feast of Unleavened Bread--Leviticus 23:16) following Jesus' crucifixion, the original 12 disciples of Jesus Christ were gathered together to observe this festival of God. Acts 2:1's language ("when the day was fully come") confirms that they were gathering together at an appointed time that could be calculated on the Hebrew calendar that they observed. Acts 2:1 records that while they were gathered on that day, a mighty sound came "suddenly," and they were given the miraculous ability to speak "with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4)." The remaining verses clearly show us what this gift of tongues was and wasn't and we need to give heed to this example as it shows what is a legitimate gift of tongues from God's Holy Spirit and what is a fake or deceitful gift of tongues. To begin with, "tongues" is a 1611 *King James Version* biblical translation word which was translated from the Greek word "glossa" which simply means tongue or language. Acts 2:6-12 adds that there were many people in Jerusalem that day from foreign nations because it was one of God's High Holy Days of Leviticus 23 which could be calculated on the calendar and devout men and their families had come on pilgrimages to observe the Holy Day in Jerusalem. It is the Feast of Weeks which can be easily calculated on a calendar, as one must literally "count 50 days" to arrive at the proper day for the Feast of Weeks.

The Audience on the First Pentecost Day:

A digression is necessary to place this event of the giving of tongues in proper context. Let's consider the audience that witnessed and experienced the giving of tongues to the 12 disciples who became the 12 apostles after this event occurred. For those who have read my books, the listing of many of the nations in verses 9-11 has special meaning. It includes Parthians, Medes, Elamites and "dwellers in Mesopotamia." All these nations or regions were ruled by the Parthian Empire at that time. The Parthians were the descendants of the relocated ten tribes of Israel and it was their empire which fulfilled the very specific prophecy in Isaiah 14:2 that the exiled ten tribes would one day rise up and rule over all the nations and empires that had taken them captive. The passage also mentions "Cappadocia" and "Pontus" which were located in what was once called Anatolia or Asia Minor (modern Turkey). *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (1985 printing, p. 807) defines Pontus as being "a province of Asia Minor stretching along the south shore of the Black Sea from Bithynia to Armenia." Many scattered Israelites lived in Anatolia. Paul himself was a member of the Israelite tribe of Benjamin who came from Tarsus in southern Anatolia (Acts 9:11, Romans 11:1). Phrygia and Pamphylia were districts of southern Anatolia. The list of attendees also includes people from "Asia" which has to specify other regions of Asia not included in Anatolia or Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Since Cappadocia was on the southern shore of the Black Sea, "Asia" would include the northern shore of the Black Sea. It would also include areas to the east of Cappadocia where Armenia and the Caucasus Mountain region were located. Acts 2 already has mentioned many regions of the Parthian Empire so "Asia" would indicate the part of Asia north and east of the Black Sea and Anatolia. This is the region of the Scythians who were called "Saka" by the Romans and "Sacaе" by the Greeks. Both these terms preserve

the root word of the name "Isaac" after whom the ten tribes were prophesied to be named throughout the generations of mankind (Genesis 21:12). Paul also mentioned in Colossians 3:11 that the Scythians were the opposite of "barbarians." Devout Jews like Paul would have considered gentiles as "barbarians," but in a secular sense, Roman citizens (such as Paul was--Romans 16:37-38) referred to all peoples outside the Roman empire as "barbarians."

Not coincidentally, my book cites one of the Scythian tribes as bearing the name of "Asii," after which the continent of Asia was likely named. The account in Acts also records people were there from "the parts of Libya around Cyrene." This is a region where there were still descendants of the Carthaginians living who had been part of the Punic civilization of Carthage--also called the Western Phoenicians--who were part of the Israelite/Phoenician empire founded by Kings David and Solomon of Israel and King Hiram of Tyre. When Rome defeated and destroyed the city of Carthage, my book cites historical source documents that various Carthaginian/Punic cities joined the Romans to throw off the yoke of Carthage's tyranny and arrogance and therefore lived on as part of the Roman Empire's subjects and/or citizenry. That particular region would have been especially inhabited by Israelites, so the Bible is "right on target" in citing that specific region of the North African coast as a source of devout pilgrims who came to attend the Feast of Weeks in Acts 2. To conclude this point, the audience that heard the apostles speaking in tongues consisted of devout worshipers of God who were from the scattered and exiled ten tribes of Israel. They were not all Jews as "Judea" is just one of the regions mentioned in the list of nations and regions in Acts 2:8-10. The Apostle Peter knew that both Jews from Judah and Israelites from the ten tribes were there in the crowd of listeners as he addresses both groups in his

recorded comments. In Acts 2:14, he addresses the "men of Judah," but in verse 22 he shifts focus and addresses listeners as "You men of Israel." It is not an insignificant point that in Acts 2, the 12 apostles were speaking to members of the 12 tribes of Israel who were physically present in Jerusalem for a Holy Day. Because of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit to the 12 apostles, Christendom has since called this Old Testament festival "Pentecost Sunday" as it always falls on a Sunday (the "first day of the week" or "the morrow after the Sabbath [Day]" as Leviticus 23:16 specifies).

The Languages Given on Pentecost Day:

Now for a discussion of the giving of the divine gift of speaking in tongues or languages that occurred in Acts 2. Notice one very key fact. In verse 6, it is recorded that "every man heard them speak **in his own language** (*KJV, emphasis added*)." In verse 11, the assembled people stated "we do hear **in our own tongues** the wonderful works of God (*emphasis added*)." It is critical to understand this point. None of the 12 apostles was speaking in anything like what modern Christians call "glossolalia" or a "prayer language." *They were each speaking in known foreign languages of that time.* Each of the apostles was speaking in a previously unknown to them language of that time which was fluently understood by a contingent of people in the crowd who had come from the part of the world that spoke that same language. Each apostle proclaimed the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ as the Promised Messiah to the linguistic group that understood that apostle. Each apostle was speaking to a group of people that understood the Old Testament prophecies about the suffering Messiah quite well. Unless the attendees in the crowd were devout followers of the God of the Torah/Old Testament laws, they would not have been making a pilgrimage trip to Jerusalem to keep one of God's Holy Days

proclaimed in Leviticus 23. It is noteworthy that after the events of Acts 2 transpired, most of the apostles are never again mentioned in the books of the New Testament. I think it is obvious that each apostle learned quickly which group of people could understand the new language that was given to him that day. Since Jesus Christ had told the 12 apostles that each one of them would rule over one of the 12 tribes of Israel in the Kingdom of God after Jesus Christ returned (Luke 22:30), and since the 12 tribes had delegations there in Jerusalem in the Acts 2 crowd to hear the apostles speak in their new divinely-given languages; I believe that each apostle who "disappeared" from Jerusalem's environs and New Testament accounts afterwards accompanied the people whose language they now spoke when they returned to their home countries. Indeed, in giving each apostle their new language, Jesus Christ was effectively giving the apostles their "marching orders" regarding their new destinations to which they were to travel to by virtue of which language they were given. For example, legend and tradition strongly record that the Apostle Thomas died in India at a later date. This indicates that he was given the language or dialect of the Israelites who lived in the eastern-most region of the Parthian Empire and in the Saka kingdoms of that time which were located in what we would call Pakistan and India. [The historical records of where each of the apostles journeyed to is found in my book, *Parthia--The Forgotten Ancient Superpower.*]

None of the apostles spoke in anything that could be called glossolalia or a prayer language. This fact must not be overlooked when trying to understand the subject of what is a valid and divinely given gift of speaking in tongues in our contemporary world.

Other believers in the Apostolic age were also given the gift of

speaking in foreign languages. Growing up as a devout Jew in the Hellenistic region of the Roman Empire, Paul doubtless spoke Greek, Latin and Aramaic/Hebrew. He also states that he came to speak in the languages of many nations. Indeed, in writing to the Corinthian church, which had many members who spoke in tongues, Paul stated he could "speak in tongues more than you all (I Corinthians 14:18)." I Corinthians 13:1 even indicates Paul spoke in the "tongues of angels" as well as men. I find it intriguing that Paul mentioned "tongues of angels" in the plural. This indicates that there is more than one angelic language. That begs more questions than this article will address so I will merely note this point in passing.

Paul's Teachings to the Corinthian Church about Tongues-Speaking:

The passages of the book of Acts, Revelation 2-3 and the epistles of Paul make it clear that each early Christian church had its own distinctive characteristics as well as strengths and weaknesses. The churches at Berea and Ephesus were cerebral, doctrinally oriented churches that prized knowledge (Acts 17:10-13, Revelation 2:1-7), but the church at Corinth was what we could today call a Pentecostal church. It had and prized the gift of speaking in tongues. Because this was such an issue in Corinth, Paul wrote to them a considerable amount of instructions and warnings about how the gift of tongues was to be used and not used. I Corinthians 14 is the key chapter for Paul's instructions about the gift of speaking in tongues. Chapter 13, which leads up to Paul's discussion about speaking in tongues, mentions that speaking in tongues and other gifts are all real spiritual gifts, but he states that having Christian love is a better gift than speaking in tongues, having prophetic gifts, having great knowledge, etc.

I Corinthians 14:1 shows Paul said it was not wrong to desire spiritual gifts, but verse 12 adds that these spiritual gifts must be used for the edification of the church members. One gets the impression from verses 22-25 that the Corinthian church had so many people speaking in different tongues that their church services had become a confusing mess. Paul warned them that people coming into their assembly might think them "mad" (or crazy) because it would have seemed like a bedlam of confusion to have several people speaking in contradictory tongues at the same time. Paul had to set down some rules for the gift of tongues to be used wisely and to the benefit of the congregation. In verses 26-33, Paul set forth some rules on how the gift of speaking in languages should be used properly. In verses 26-27, Paul directed that a church service should feature no more than two or three people speaking in a different language, and he adds that they should not speak concurrently. They were also to speak "by course" or "in turn" as the marginal reference of my Bible states. And in what is a vital point sometimes neglected in modern Pentecostal churches, Paul specified that *unless someone else could serve as an interpreter of the language* being spoken by a particular speaker in a new or foreign tongue, that particular speaker should "keep silence in the church." Paul would never allow any church service to feature or include anyone who spoke in glossolalia that no one else could properly understand and translate for the edification of all present. Paul's instructions serve two important purposes. The first is that if no one can understand a particular tongue being spoken, then that speaker should sit down and be quiet because no one could possibly be edified by an unknown set of words so it is a waste of time to include it in a church service. As Paul wrote in verse 19, it would be more useful to speak five words that could be understood by others than ten thousand words in a language unintelligible to others. The second purpose is to make sure that

the speaker of an unknown tongue is actually being gifted by the Holy Spirit and not some alternate spirit that is not from the Holy Spirit. After all, Paul said he could speak (and obviously understand) the "tongues of angels." It is possible that some glossolalia or prayer language utterances may be inspired by demonic influences of fallen angels, not by the Holy Spirit. On that possibility, I have an account to share with you that I obtained from a reliable first-person source.

A Contemporary Warning about Tongues-Speaking:

It is known by many that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) sends young missionaries to nations all over the world which speak a wide variety of languages. Their missionaries, if sent to a foreign nation, learn to speak that nation's language in classrooms. The Mormons, therefore, have skilled speakers of many foreign languages among their missionaries. I have had Mormon friends and have been, at their invitation, a guest at Mormon church services and have been in a series of Bible studies with Mormons. I am not and have never been a Mormon, but I value my Mormon friends and have come to learn much about their beliefs and practices. One Mormon friend shared an experience with me that speaks directly to the misuse of glossolalia that I will share with readers of this article. He said that when he was a young missionary, he was paired with a young Mormon from Polynesia as they went to American people as missionaries. They met one family who was Pentecostal and they agreed that on successive Sundays, each would attend as guests in the others' churches. When my Mormon friend and his Polynesian fellow-missionary went to the Pentecostal church, one lady went to the podium and spoke for a time in unintelligible glossolalia. She smiled and acted ever-so religious during her babbling in incomprehensible utterances. During her speaking time, my Mormon friend noticed that his

Polynesian friend (from Samoa) was getting very angry and could barely restrain it. Afterwards, my Mormon friend asked the Polynesian why he became so angry during the Pentecostal service. The Polynesian said that although no one else at the Pentecostal church could understand the lady babbling in glossolalia, *he could understand her*. She was speaking fluent Samoan and she was cursing God and praising the devil in her "speaking in tongues" time. Neither she nor any of the people in the Pentecostal church realized a devil had taken over their church podium. I believe this account as my Mormon friend has unimpeachable honesty. This is also a graphic modern illustration of why Paul gave the instructions in I Corinthians 13 that he did. In ordering the Corinthians to "keep silence" and not speak in church if neither they nor anyone else in attendance could understand some unknown tongue or utterance, Paul realized that there were such spiritual potential dangers in speaking in languages not understood by anyone listening to the words and he gave his instructions to prevent such blasphemies from occurring.

Paul also had the gift of prophecy and one of his prophecies is found in I Timothy 4:1. In it, he warns that "the Spirit speaks expressly that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits..." Paul lists "forbidding to marry" and enforced vegetarianism as two examples of the "doctrine of devils" that will seduce believers in the latter times (i.e. latter days). Seducing spirits have many weapons in their inventory of deceits besides those two specifically mentioned. One way spirits could seduce believers in our latter day period of time is by speaking through a particular person or self-appointed prophet who draws people from the revealed faith by speaking to believers in some form of "tongue" or glossolalia which only appears to come from God, but which is not from God at all.

Always remember Isaiah 8:20, which warns: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word [the scriptures] it is because there is no light in them." Always use the scriptures, not spiritual manifestations, as the yardstick by which you judge who is speaking the truth of God or conveying a true word of God to others.

Those modern churches that do have speaking in tongues as part of their services, group meetings, etc. need to be careful to follow Paul's instructions. If anyone (including the pastor or leadership) speaks in some kind of foreign or unknown language, unless someone in attendance can accurately understand and translate the language being spoken, the speaker should sit down and be quiet. If a speaker in an unknown language is the only person present who claims to understand what his own unknown tongue is saying, he or she should *not* be allowed to continue. *Unless a different person can both understand the unknown language and translate it for the benefit of others*, Paul's instructions state the speaker's speech and translation cannot be reliably trusted. Paul would not permit a speaker to both speak and translate his/her own tongues speaking. Paul specified that a different person would have to confirm that the speaker of an unknown tongue was speaking a real language and that it could be translated for the edification of all Christians present. Otherwise, the potential for either human deception or demonic deception is inherent in the situation.

Paul also wrote in verse 32 that "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets," and in verse 40 that "Let all things be done decently [properly] and in order." Paul would never have permitted a situation to develop where speakers claiming to have the gift of tongues would speak concurrently or without *someone else present to confirm and translate what they were saying*.

Modern churches which allow for speaking in tongues need to abide by Paul's instructions to the Pentecostal Corinthian church to make sure they do things "decently and in order."

Prayer Languages and Other Considerations:

Some modern charismatic Christians have what they call a private prayer language. Some private "prayer languages" can truthfully be from God as I Corinthians 14:2 does indicate. However, in such cases, Paul still does not allow them to be spoken publicly in church services or meetings with other people if there is no second-person confirmation or witness that the message isn't meaningless babbling or a demonically-inspired rant against God.

In its historical context, the Acts 2 account of foreign languages being "downloaded" miraculously into the 12 apostles' minds was an exceptional circumstance. When the 12 apostles were commissioned to bring the Gospel to all the ancient world (Matthew 24:19-20), it was necessary for them to have the ability to speak the languages of those foreign nations to effectively do their jobs. God is a practical God, and knew that fact. Therefore, he not only gave them that gift in a miraculous download, he did it in a very public way on one of God's High Holy Days to confirm the validity of the gift being from God himself. Since there were many people who could understand each new language given to each apostle, Paul's instructions about properly using the gift of foreign languages in public settings was accomplished in the events of Acts 2. Today, there is admittedly less need for such gifts as there are many very qualified foreign-language schools or home courses where one can learn a foreign language in a reasonably short time. Also, there are no modern apostles in need of their assignments about where to travel to preach the Gospel, unlike the situation that

existed when the Christian church began in Acts 2.

How valuable is the gift of speaking in a foreign language? It can be very valuable if God wants his Gospel to go quickly to a group of people who speak a language in which no speaker has the Bible or the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because the Bible is now available in virtually every language on earth and there are Christians in virtually every language group on earth, the need for God to give the gift of speaking in a foreign language is minimal to non-existent unless he wants to commission a particular person to go to the group that can speak the language which is divinely-given (as was the case in Acts 2). Our modern circumstances are very different than what existed in the time of Acts 2. At that time, all the apostles could only speak the languages commonly-spoken in Roman Judea or one of the surrounding provinces. No one in the language groups of the nations listed in Acts 2:8-10 knew the Gospel and some may not have had the Torah/Tanakh available in their own written languages. By giving the apostles special divinely-given gifts of foreign languages, God not only commissioned and equipped them to go to distant nations, he credentialed them as well because the listeners in the Acts 2 crowd went home to their own nations as witnesses that the apostle in their midst was divinely given the gift of speaking their language. It is even possible that the people in the crowd that heard the apostles speak after they received their gifts of foreign languages actually saw the "flames of fire" over the heads of the apostles as they spoke in Acts 2. This would have powerfully credentialed them to a crowd which already was composed of devout believers (Acts 2:5).

Does one have to suddenly and miraculously speak in a foreign language or some form of glossolalia prayer language to "prove" they are a Christian? Of course not! Paul made it very clear in I

Corinthians 12:4-11 that each Christian will receive different gifts of the Holy Spirit and they are to all be used to edify all other believers.

Conclusion:

A final point will come from Paul's writing to the charismatic/Pentecostal Corinthian church about additional instruction he gave about speaking in tongues and about spiritual gifts in general. In I Corinthians 12, Paul writes additional guidance about *all* spiritual gifts. In verse 4, he writes that there are "diversities of gifts but [they come from] the same Spirit." He goes on to teach that the Holy Spirit dispenses spiritual gifts to believers in whatever way or portion that God decides to give them for the edification of the body of Christ. In verses 8-10, he lists the following as valid gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing power, miracle-working power, prophetic abilities, discerning spirits, speaking different languages and, finally, interpreting of languages. It is worth noting that the gifts of speaking in tongues and interpreting them are listed last in Paul's listing of spiritual gifts. One could assume that all gifts are equally important and useful to the body of Christ or that speaking in and interpreting tongues were the last in a descending list of importance among spiritual gifts. However, in I Corinthians 13:1, Paul makes it clear that having Christian love and selfless charity toward others is the greatest gift of all. All other spiritual gifts must be used in the context of loving edification to fellow believers. If you ever witness or experience the manifestation of a spiritual gift which does not glorify God, confess Jesus Christ as Savior (Philippians 2:11) and promote true edification of the body of Christ, be wary of it. However, if it does do those things and is given in accordance with Paul's instructions about spiritual gifts, then accept and rejoice in it.