

# **Issues in Charismatic Theology**

## **The Cessation of Tongues**

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### **1. Introduction**

In our last class we examined the meaning and purpose of the gift of tongues in the Scripture. As a spiritual gift, it was given to edify the church. As a sign gift, it was given to validate God's prophetic revelation. It temporarily overcame the judgment of God upon mankind at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

This class will examine the duration of the biblical gift of tongues and why it ceased with the foundation of the church and the completion of the New Testament. To say that the gift of tongues is not active today does not mean that God is not able to create true tongues speaking today. It only means that the evidence shows that He has chosen not to continue the gift of tongues beyond the apostolic church.

While often sincere, tongues speaking today is merely the practice of babbling. It is not the tongues speaking which is found in the Bible. It is not a miraculous ability to speak in a language that the speaker has never known. Therefore, it authenticates nothing.

Below are several reasons why we should conclude that biblical tongues speaking does not occur today:

### **2. Modern tongues speaking is not linguistic speech**

There have been numerous studies of modern tongues speaking, involving thousands of examples. The unanimous conclusion of this research is that the Charismatic practice of speaking in tongues does not fit the linguistic characteristics of language.

William Samarin, professor of linguistics at the University of Toronto, states that modern tongues speaking is "like language in some ways, but this is only because the speaker (unconsciously) wants it to be like language. Yet in spite of superficial similarities, it is fundamentally not language."

William Welmes, professor of African Languages at UCLA, concluded his investigation with "And I must report without reservation that my sample does not sound like a language structurally. There can be not more than two contrasting vowel sounds, and a most peculiarly restricted set of consonant sounds; these combine into a very few syllable clusters which recur many times in various orders. The consonants and vowels do not all sound like English (the speakers native language), but the intonation patterns are so completely American English that the total effect is a bit ludicrous."

Eugene Nida, a famous linguist of the American Bible Society wrote, “The types of inventory and distributions would indicate clearly that this recording bears no resemblance to any actual language which has ever been treated by linguists....If then, it is not a human language, what is it? One can only say that it is a form of ‘ecstatic speech.’...On the basis of what I have learned about this type of phenomena of ‘tongues’ in other parts of the world, apparently there is the same tendency to employ one’s own inventory of sounds, in nonsense combinations, but with simulated ‘foreign’ features.”

One Harvard linguistic study included over ten thousand incidents of modern tongues speaking. They listed several reasons why they came to the conclusion that modern tongues speaking is not an actual language:

- The similarity to the speaker’s own language background.
- The high frequency of repetition of the same sounds and phrases.
- The excessive use of one or two vowels.
- The absence of any language structure.
- The interpretations were consistently of significantly greater length than the tongue utterance. This would not be the case for a direct translation.
- The inconsistency of interpretation regarding the same clause or phrase.
- The “King James” style of interpretation. The interpretations would commonly employ the phraseology of 17th century English as is found in the King James Version of the Bible.
- There is no known relationship between any example of tongues speaking and any known language of the world.

Those who consider tongues to be ecstatic speech are unaffected by this linguistic analysis because they are not claiming that their tongues speaking a known human language. However, they are faced with the problem that Acts 2 clearly depicts tongues as an actual known human language.

Since the biblical gift of tongues is an actual human language and since analysis of modern tongues speaking is not an actual human language we can conclude that modern tongues speaking is not the gift of tongues as found in the Bible.

### **3. Current tongues speaking is not unique to Christianity**

The modern practice of Charismatic tongues speaking is not unique to the Charismatic Movement. This is significant since if non-Christian can reproduce the same alleged signs and wonders then they can hardly be compelling evidence of supernatural ability.

This type of ecstatic speech is found among many religions, including Tibetan monks, Eskimos, African tribes and occult groups. Tradition reports that Mohammed spoke in tongues. Brigham Young spoke in tongues, interpreting his own messages and hundreds of elders spoke in tongues at the dedication of their temple in Salt Lake City. Tongues have also been reproduced in psychological studies.

Furthermore, the phenomenon was not unique to Christianity even in biblical times. From the oracle of Delphi, which was not far from Corinth, there were found ecstatic utterances. Dionysian rites contain tongues speaking as well as many magicians of the first century. These occurrences were not the tongues of languages but were mere babbling. They were, and continue to be, a counterfeit of God's true miracle of biblical tongues speaking.

This evidence demonstrates that what is currently practiced is not a supernatural sign of God and therefore it certainly does not validate God's revelation. This type of speech is not validating other religions and few Charismatics would want to be associated with them. Speaking an actual human language that you have never learned is demonstrative and verifiable proof of God's power unlike any emotional utterance.

#### **4. Current tongues speaking is a learned behavior**

If tongues speaking as practiced today was truly a supernatural gift from God then we should expect this ability to exist without our need to teach someone so that they can perform tongues speaking. The New Testament gives no instructions on how to obtain the gift of tongues and never describes anyone being taught to speak in tongues. Yet Charismatic teaching abounds with step-by-step booklets on "how to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues." In many Charismatic fellowships, special services are regularly held to guide people to speak in tongues.

One representative example of charismatic instructions on how to speak in tongues comes from television evangelist Robert Tilton:

*"You don't beg for the Holy Spirit, or for the heavenly language. You simply ask for it and believe you receive it based on what God's Word promises.... The Holy Spirit prompts you, or gives you utterance (Acts 2:4) to speak in the heavenly language. You then act on that utterance, and as a step of faith you begin to utter the syllables and words which suddenly come to your thoughts."*

*"Now speak. You speak the utterances coming to your thoughts. Speak them out loud. Faith is an act. Jesus called for us to walk on the water. Don't even speak in English or a language you know. Speak the syllables on your lips. You are speaking in a new tongue. It sounds like gibberish? It's repetitive? Don't go by what it sounds like or what it feels like. Go by what the Bible says about it. It is a promise. It's yours. You have done what the Bible has told you to do. Continue praying to God in tongues and expect to experience the comforter, the intercessor, the counselor, the advocate, the strengthener, the standby, and the source of power."*

*"The Word of God is the seed. Satan is the fowl of the air that tries to steal the seed. In other words, he'll sometimes come to your thoughts, attempting to convince you that your experience isn't authentic. Stand by what the Bible tells you about it, not what your thoughts, your friends, or even your church says about it."*

While not all charismatics resort to this degree of pressure and manipulation, Tilton demonstrates that modern tongues is something that is a learned behavior. It is simply a case of some who practice ecstatic utterances produce this learned behavior in others.

This is why modern tongues speaking can also be found among other religions, since they too can learn the behavior. As a learned behavior, modern tongues are not a sign to unbelievers, in contrast to what 1 Corinthians 14:22 says about tongues. Since unbelievers can learn to speak gibberish in the same way it can hardly be considered a sign or miracle. It is a natural ability to vocalize sounds.

Since charismatic tongues speaking is not linguistic speech, since it is practiced among other religions and since it must be learned, we must conclude that this modern practice is not biblical in its nature.

## **5. The general testimony of church history shows the cessation of tongues**

Cleon Rogers, wrote, "It is significant that the gift of tongues is nowhere alluded to, hinted at or even found in the early writings of the Post Apostolic Fathers." Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine considered tongues a remote practice that happened in the very early days of Christianity.

In order to defend their view, some have attempted to show that tongues have been active throughout church history. Their evidence is two-fold:

- a. Clear evidence of ecstatic utterances among heretical groups such as the Montanists of the second and third century, the Jansenists in the eighteenth century, Cevennot prophets who lived in France in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the Shakers of the eighteenth century, the Irvingites in the nineteenth century. These are not groups whose practices should be our model. In some cases, their practice of ecstatic utterances was one reason for their condemnation by the Christian church.
- b. Very unclear evidence of tongues speaking from orthodox Christian leaders. Some quote from ancient church leaders who are speaking about heretical groups. More often people read tongues into vague statements which are not referring to tongues speaking. We should not try to read into the writings of church history in order to get a noteworthy Christian figure on our side of the debate.

The general testimony of church history is that the gift of tongues has ceased. The most notable specific case to show this is the Montanists. We have covered the history of the church with the sign gifts in our classes on Cessationism, Miracles and Prophecy.

The testimony of church history is that the biblical practice of tongues occurred during the time of the apostles. Since then there have not been claims of speaking in a language that one has never learned within orthodox Christianity until the modern Charismatic movement of the twentieth century. The practices of ecstatic speech were localized among heretic groups that were opposed by the true Christians.

If the gift of tongues did not cease with the apostles, then how is the 1,800 year absence of tongues speaking within the true church explained? Some accept the ceasing of the gift of tongues with the early church and claim that the age of the apostles was the former rain of Joel 2:23 and the twentieth century outbreak of tongues speaking is the latter rain. This is a flawed interpretation in that it allegorizes the word “rain.” “Rain” in Joel 2:23 means RAIN, not the twentieth century Charismatic Movement. In the Old Testament, the former rain comes in the spring and the latter rain comes in the autumn. Joel 2:23-26 teaches that in the millennium God will bring rain as He did before so crops will grow plentifully. It is also obvious from Joel 2:24-32 that the prophecies are yet to be completely fulfilled. We are still waiting for the prophecy of the millennial kingdom.

The Charismatic Movement simply has no answer to the testimony of church history. The Apostle Paul was correct when he wrote, “if there are tongues, they will cease” (1 Corinthians 13:8). The testimony of history demonstrates they have. This overwhelming evidence that tongues speaking ceased at the end of the apostolic era puts the burden of proof entirely upon Charismatics to show the validity of modern tongues speaking.

## **6. Biblical tongues speaking was a sign for unbelieving Israel**

1 Corinthians explicitly states that the purpose of the gift of tongues was to be a sign to unbelievers: “Thus, tongues are a sign not for those who believe but for unbelievers, whereas prophecy is not for unbelievers but for those who believe” (14:22). The statement that tongues were given as a sign for unbelievers begins with the word “thus.” This points to the prior verse, “It is written in the law: ‘By people speaking strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to me,’ says the Lord” (14:21).

The prophecy quoted by Paul is from Isaiah 28:11-12 when Isaiah warned the people of Israel of the coming Assyrian invasion for the judgment of the sin of their nation. Like the Assyrians spoke in a language unfamiliar to Israel, so the foreign tongues were likewise used by God to bring a message of judgment to the nation (“this people” 14:21).

The unbelievers in 1 Corinthians 14:22 thus refers to unbelieving Israel who are not listening in the same way as their ancestors did not listen centuries earlier. This correspondence is supported by the incidents of tongues speaking in the Book of Acts. In Acts 2, the unbelieving Jews considered the apostles to be drunk. In Acts 10 the gift of tongues spoken by Gentiles amazed the Jews who came with Peter that Gentiles were saved apart from Judaism. The final occurrence was in Acts 19 where Jews spoke in tongues upon belief, similar to Acts 2, only among people who only knew the baptism of John and were unfamiliar with Christ. In each incident, Jews were involved.

As the Lord gave the gift of tongues as a sign to unbelievers in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy about Israel, we see that Israel did not listen to this sign. The age of the Church incorporating Gentiles with Jews was established and the role of such a sign to Israel was complete.

## **7. 1 Corinthians 13:8 teaches the cessation of the gift of tongues**

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 specifically teaches that prophecy, tongues and knowledge will cease to exist. This passage was covered in our class on Cessationism. This passage teaches that the gift of tongues was done away, along with prophecy and knowledge, at the end of the apostolic age and the completion of the New Testament.

Tongues are connected to revelatory knowledge and prophecy but it is in the middle voice, indicating that they will cease of themselves. As the Lord's prophetic revelation was done away, the role of tongues as a supporting sign was no longer necessary.

## **8. The cessation of direct revelation from God shows the cessation of tongues**

As we have seen, 1 Corinthians 13:8 teaches the gift of tongues is no more in operation today than is prophecy and knowledge. There is no longer a need to validate God's revelation since the end of the New Testament has brought the end of direct revelation from God during the church age. There will be prophecy occurring again after the church age, during the seven-year tribulation period (cf. Revelation 11). Tongues is not an active spiritual gift because its very purpose for existing is no longer active.

Since God is not giving new revelation today through His appointed messengers, He is likewise not enabling anyone to speak supernaturally in a language they do not know. This is because biblical tongues speaking served the purpose of affirming the messengers and their message by demonstrating His miraculous power in association with their prophetic ministry. The conclusion of the era of prophetic revelation produced an end to the gift of tongues that had served to validate the revelation that was given by God.

## **9. Why understanding that tongues have ceased is important**

As we have seen, the biblical gift of tongues was the ability to speak in an actual foreign language which the speaker had never studied. The purpose of the gift of tongues was as a sign to unbelievers in order to validate God's messengers and His message.

Since biblical tongues speaking affirmed God's revelation and since God has chosen to close His revelation to man in this age with the conclusion of the New Testament, the need for the gift of tongues is no longer present. Therefore, the Charismatic Movement has distorted the meaning, practice and purpose of the biblical gift of tongues.

Unlike when the Pentecostal Movement arose in the early part of the twentieth century, most Christians who are not Charismatic have taken a tolerant view of Charismatic tongues speaking. More recently we have seen our society becoming quite tolerant of divergent beliefs and practices, which has been manifested in the church in many ways. As long as an utterance does not disrupt a church service, contemporary Christianity has chosen to no longer challenge the truth about Charismatic tongues speaking in the name of the unity of the body of Christ.

Worse yet, those who are willing to teach the truth about the current tongues practice of the Charismatic Movement are often denounced for doing so. The spirit of modern evangelicalism is more committed to reaching beyond denominational barriers to demonstrate the appearance of unity than it is committed to seeking and teaching truth.

The following review of some of the damage caused by Charismatic tongues speaking should move us to become more willing to speak about the corruption of God's unique gift to the church.

- a. This misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has allowed the pagan religious practice of ecstatic utterances into the public and private worship of the true God.
- b. This misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has greatly diminished the appreciation for the significance of the miraculous gift of tongues that God gave in the apostolic era.
- c. This misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has resulted in a great confusion over the true meaning of tongues in the Bible.
- d. This misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has caused a division in the universal church and in many local churches over this issue.
- e. This misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has caused Christians who do not practice charismatic tongues speaking to be considered by Charismatics as not being baptized with the Holy Spirit. The result of this is those believers in Charismatic churches who are not practicing their ecstatic babbling are led to believe they do not have the power of the Holy Spirit.
- f. This misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has caused churches that do not practice charismatic tongues speaking to be considered cold and lifeless.
- g. This misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has hurt the ministry of prayer among those who in a misguided attempt to communicate with God are babbling.
- h. This misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has encouraged an unhealthy mystical element of spirituality to exist within Christianity. This is a failed attempt to meet our spiritual hunger.
- i. This misunderstanding of the biblical gift of tongues has caused unbelievers to think just what Paul wrote about them in 1 Corinthians 14:23 when they hear speaking that no one understood...“you are mad!”

These problems should be significant enough to make us unapologetic in our opposition to the modern tongues movement.

## **6. Conclusion**

A strong case has been made to show that the biblical gift of tongues is no longer functioning. This case is based on more than just the fact that we do not see the true gift of tongues today. While it is true that we do not see it, that alone does not preclude its possible existence.

Our case is based on more than the fact that from the first century, we have not seen the functioning of the biblical gift of tongues. While the testimony of church history is also a weighty argument against the current practice of ecstatic speaking, it alone does not preclude the possible existence of the gift of tongues. Someone could still claim that just because we have not seen it and others have not seen it does not necessarily mean that the biblical gift of tongues has ceased. To arrive firmly at that conclusion requires even more support.

The reason why we believe the gift of tongues has ceased to exist with the passing of the New Testament apostles and prophets is based on what the Bible says. The Scripture explicitly teaches that tongues will cease in 1 Corinthians 13:8. Tongues speaking is contrasted with faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 13:13), which all endure throughout the church age.

Examination of the context of 1 Corinthians 13:8 connects this cessation to the end of prophecy. Tongues and prophecy are directly related to each other in God's Word because tongues is a sign to unbelieving Israel that God is revealing Himself. This cessation of tongues speaking coincides with the completion of prophecy for the church age, namely the completion of the New Testament. Since prophecy has been done away with until the end of the church age, the gift of tongues has correspondingly ceased. Since God is no longer giving new revelation today, there is no longer any use for the gift of tongues as a validating sign of God's revelation to man.