

Doctrinal Outlines

THE TONGUES QUESTION

I. Introduction

- A. Here is a vital question! You need to know the answer!
- B. Are the ecstatic utterances -- called gibberish by some observers -- that boil forth from the mouths of members of some charismatic churches true manifestations of the New Testament gift of tongues? Are they from the holy spirit?
- C. Or are they, as others would contend, a ridiculous and dangerous counterfeit?
- D. This question is of no small importance. Many feel such "speaking in tongues" is proof one has the holy spirit, or at least proof one has some superior level of the spirit. Is this true? You need to know.

II. The Basic Doctrine

- A. The Bible gift of tongues is the God-given, miraculous ability to speak in a human language that one has not learned in any normal way.
- B. It is decidedly not that manifestation of emotional and indecipherable babbling that some charismatic circles today label "tongues."

III. The Usual Teachings of This World

- A. With all the confusion, how can we prove, with confidence, exactly what the Bible teaching on tongues is -- and what it isn't?
- B. The process of proving the Bible truth about tongues has three steps: 1) Listing the common teachings. 2) Carefully examining all the major Bible verses about tongues and distilling from them all the essential traits of speaking in tongues. 3) Comparing the common beliefs with the clear biblical record and seeing if the two match or clash.
- C. The commonly held false beliefs about this subject form a thick web teeming with pet theories and often contradictory ideas.

- D. Often such "speaking in tongues" takes place at an emotionally charged religious service called a "tarry meeting," where the "spirit" is "called down" or "worked up." Often such "working up" consists of frenzied repeating of certain phrases like "Glory, glory" or "Sweet Jesus."
- E. Suddenly one or two or more, either men or women, are "overcome with the spirit" and begin shouting gibberish. Usually this includes waving of the arms, jumping, shouting or even rolling on the floor.
- F. One or another of the congregation may rise to "interpret" what a speaker is saying, usually attributing to the person great utterances of praise for God and other spiritual insights.
- G. Some groups view this phenomenon as absolute proof one has the spirit of God. Some even believe it is the only proof.
- H. Still others allow that Christians who do not "speak in tongues" in this manner may have the spirit, but that those who do "speak in tongues" have attained to a "higher level" of the spirit with such speaking. It is a greatly prized spiritual goal in all tongue-speaking circles.
- I. Some believe that such "speaking in tongues" is related to the episode of the "tongues of fire" in Acts 2:3. Others believe it to be the "baptism of the Spirit" predicted by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:11).
- J. Beliefs differ, too, as to whether the utterances mean anything in any language. Some believe the utterances to be the "tongues of angels" (I Corinthians 13:1). Others say the languages are unknown and cannot be known.
- K. Still others believe such utterances to indeed be known foreign languages spoken today, or at least previously known languages such as ancient Hebrew.
- L. All who do such speaking take the greatest pride in the fact they "spoke in tongues," not in what, if anything, they said that might have meant something.
- M. But few, it seems, stop and ask themselves whether their gift accords with what the Bible calls "tongues." Often such speakers do indeed quote chapter and verse to support their ideas, but usually such quotations are ripped entirely out of context and explained illogically.

- N. When we look carefully at the main verses, however, a clear picture emerges.

IV. The Bible Teaching

- A. The place to begin is Acts 2:1-21. The verses in this passage form the crux of the Bible doctrine of tongues.
1. Here recorded is the first outpouring of the holy spirit. After the death of Christ, believers were assembled on the day of Pentecost when a mighty wind filled the room, fire descended upon them and they began to speak in tongues.
 2. The apostle Peter then spoke in tongues to others who were gathered in Jerusalem; all marveled at the gift.
- B. Such a brief summary at first might seem to support the beliefs of the charismatics. But look closer!
1. Note that this was not a "tarry meeting," but a church service on Pentecost, a Holy Day the Bible commands true Christians to keep (Leviticus 23:15-21). Pentecost was a day -- a Holy Day -- not an event.
 2. And those who advocate tarry meetings simply misunderstand Christ's command for the apostles to wait in Jerusalem till the spirit was given (Luke 24:49). The word tarry in this verse comes from the Middle English tarien, meaning "wait." Modern translations bear this out.
 3. Further, Acts 2:2 shows a wind filled the whole house suddenly. It was a wind that made the noise, and it was sudden. It was not that their mouths gradually worked up a wind!
 4. Further, the tongues of fire were not the tongues in their mouths, but small, burning fires.
 5. Notice, also, that all were filled with the spirit, not just some.
 6. And, most importantly, see that the tongues Peter spoke in were known languages of the day that were clearly understood by those listening.
 - a. The listeners marveled because Peter, in their ears, seemed to be speaking in their native, local dialects, although he obviously hadn't learned all these languages by going to school or through some other normal method of study.

- b. Peter was not speaking unintelligible gibberish. Further, we see no descriptions of wildly gyrating bodies, waving hands or rolling on the ground.
- C. Before leaving the book of Acts, we must examine one more instance of speaking in tongues, this time in Acts 10:44-48. It was on the occasion of the first outpouring of God's spirit to the gentiles.
 - 1. The account is brief, but verse 46 clearly states that those listening heard those speaking in tongues "magnify God."
 - 2. The only conclusion is that these tongues again were known languages of the day.
- D. Acts 19:1-6 relates a similar episode.
- E. The book of I Corinthians has much to say about tongues. I Corinthians 12, verses 1 and 10, mention the gift. But verses 27-31 are the most crucial.
 - 1. In verse 28 Paul lists the governmental offices of the Church, including apostle.
 - 2. Then, beginning in verse 29, through a series of rhetorical questions, Paul emphatically proves that not all have the gift of tongues (or any of a number of other gifts, for that matter).
 - 3. Clearly, having the gift of tongues cannot be the only proof one has God's spirit. Nor is it proof of superior righteousness, for verse 31, coupled with I Corinthians 13, declares unabashedly that love is a greater gift of the spirit than speaking in tongues!
- F. I Corinthians 13:1 says that even if one has the power to speak in the "tongues of angels," he is spiritually worthless unless he has love.
- G. These are strong words indeed, and should once and for all lower tongues from any imaginary position of superiority among gifts of the spirit!
- H. And these verses do not imply that the Corinthians spoke in angelic language. For in I Corinthians 13:1-2 Paul lists numerous incredible feats, all of them beyond the capability of men (such as moving mountains with faith, and understanding every single mystery of life).
- I. He wanted the Corinthians to see that even if they could do certain things far beyond their normal

abilities, it still wouldn't make them righteous unless they were filled with and expressing God's love.

J. It is clear that he spoke of the tongues of angels also as something beyond their current abilities, just like moving mountains.

K. I Corinthians 14 is a crucial chapter, for it is devoted entirely to the topic of tongues. Be sure to review every word of this chapter on your own. Numerous points stand out and with great force defeat the arguments of modern tongue speakers.

1. To begin, the same Greek word for "tongues" used in Acts is also used here, not some different word. Further, the overwhelming conclusion is that Paul wrote these words to downplay and control the gift of tongues, not to extol it.

2. The first verse of the chapter unceremoniously dethrones tongues from a position of preeminence among gifts, since it encourages normal, inspired preaching (called "prophesying," in the Authorized Version) over the gift of tongues.

3. The next verses time and again stress that the purpose of speaking in tongues is to edify the audience, not the speaker.

This, of course, is vastly different from modern tarry meetings and the like, where the one who "speaks in tongues" is the center of attention while the audience just sits back and watches the show. No real edification takes place.

4. Verses 10-17 stress the need for the audience to understand the words, and thus make plain that the words are capable of being understood. Clearly, Paul is writing of common human languages of the day.

5. Verse 23 makes the same point in a different way. Paul warns against speaking in a language the audience doesn't understand, saying that to do so would make one who is an unbeliever or unlearned think the believers were crazy.

(After all, what sense does it make to speak French to an audience if the audience doesn't know French?)

6. When Paul says an unlearned person would be confused, he tacitly is saying that a learned person would not be confused. It is abundantly

clear that these languages were real ones that could be learned!

7. The remaining verses drive the final nails into the coffin of the modern misunderstanding. Verse 27 limits the number who may speak in tongues at any one time to two or three who must take turns.

It demands calm order in the service -- the very opposite of the emotionally charged atmosphere of a tarry meeting.

8. Verse 28 requires the tongues be translated for those who do not understand. If there is no translator then no speaking in tongues is allowed -- period.
9. Verse 31 demands tongues be used one by one in turn -- not at the same time in confusion.
10. Verse 32 states that the one who speaks in tongues is at all times in control of himself. This is the very opposite of modern speakers, who give themselves over to tongues and are for a while controlled by the phenomenon, so much so that they may not remember or even know what they said!
11. Finally, women are forbidden by Paul to preach in the Church at all, let alone use tongues (verse 34)! Such is not so today, when many if not most of the speakers are women.

- L. We now have listed the main beliefs about modern "speaking in tongues," and we have examined the pertinent Bible verses and extracted the key points.
- M. How obvious it is that modern "tongues" and biblical tongues are not merely different -- they are indeed opposites!
- N. The Bible tongues are real languages, modern tongues are not. One is always under control, the other is worked up to uncontrolled frenzy. One is in turn by two or three at most, the other is disorderly and confused.

One must always have an interpreter, the other may not. One is for instruction, the other for display and self-glory.

One is at a preaching service where people are to be edified by the content of the speech, the other is at an emotional tarry meeting. One is vocal only, the other is linked with wild physical movement.

O To be fair, some modern tongue speakers do claim their tongues are real languages, and some claim to interpret. Impartial studies, however, have shown that such claims are not supported by the facts.

Often only a few words or phrases of a real foreign language are detected in the ecstatic utterances -- as if spoken only by accident! -- and so-called interpretations of the same tongue-speaking episodes often vary widely and are very general even then.

P. Further, John the Baptist's reference to the baptism of the holy spirit (Matthew 3:11) does not refer to tongues as some separate baptism in addition to one's initial receipt of the holy spirit.

It is, instead, a reference to that very act of receiving God's spirit after repentance, which baptizes us into the Church of God (I Corinthians 12:13).

Q. The final two remaining questions are why God ever gave the gift of tongues, and whether the genuine gift exists today.

R. No doubt the gift of tongues was for the same purpose as other miraculous manifestations in the early Church -- to call attention to the initial outpouring of God's power, to attract attention to the Gospel message (not to the speaker) and to spread the Gospel in a part of the world peppered with people who spoke many different languages.

S. Despite claims to the contrary, people today are not seen to speak miraculously in languages they did not learn in the normal way.

1. But the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32, cited by Peter in Acts 2:16-21, may indicate God's servants will again exercise that gift at a time of God's own choosing yet future.

2. When and if that happens, God's Church will, of course, acknowledge it, while it also recognizes such a thing as one of the lesser gifts of the spirit.

V. Key Verses

The main verses about this subject fall into a few easily remembered sections of scripture.

A. Acts 2:1-21 -- the first outpouring of tongues occurred on the day of Pentecost.

- B. Acts 10:44-48 -- the first outpouring of the holy spirit on gentiles is described.
- C. I Corinthians 12 -- various scattered statements about tongues.
- D. I Corinthians 14 -- Paul's instruction about and limitations regarding tongues.

VI. Conclusion

As with so many other subjects, once again we have seen that despite their sincerity, people can be led far afield from the truth when they allow their own thoughts and emotions -- and evil spiritual influences! -- to dictate their beliefs, rather than God's precious Word.