

WHAT'S
Really
the Issue with
Speaking
in Tongues?

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Until the 20th century (precisely 1900), "speaking in tongues" as it is commonly known and practiced today, or better rendered glossolalia, was never named or found among Christian churches or communities. It began in Topeka, Kansas in 1900 when Charles Perham (a Methodist minister who started a Bible school known as Bethel College) laid hands on some of his students on December 31, 1900 and one Agnes Oznam started to speak in tongues. Glossolalia (derived from the Greek words *glossa* - tongue and *laleo* - "to speak") denotes "non-ordinary speech behavior that is institutionalized as a religious ritual in numerous Western and non-Western

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religious communities."

The discussion of spiritual gifts began in 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul informed the church of the diversity of the diversity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (12:4-31). In chapter 13, He shifts from his discussion on the gifts of the Spirit to the fruit Spirit-with heavy emphasis on love, which he identifies as the most important manifestation of the power of the gospel in the life of believer. He declares: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal....And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" 1 Corinthians 13:1,13.

In chapter 14, Paul returns to the

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discussion on spiritual gifts with particular attention to the gift of speaking in tongues, perhaps hoping that chapter 13 would have served a good prelude to chapter 14. Interestingly, even in chapter 14, Paul exhorts the gift of prophecy above the gift of speaking in tongues. He exhorts the church, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.....He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like everyone of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified" 1 Cor 14:1,4,5.

But Paul also provides the reason for

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the preference of the gift of prophecy over speaking in tongues: "For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit" (1 Cor 14:2). Some of the church members in Corinth were misusing the gift of speaking in tongues in the same way they were abusing other gifts. They came speaking in tongues when there was no need for it and no one understood them. To such people he said, "Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?" (verse 6). But he also condemned glossolalic utterances: "Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is

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being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? ⁹So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. (verses 7-9).

The gift of speaking in tongue was given for evangelistic purposes. Jesus told the apostles: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" Acts 1:8. When the promise was fulfilled in Acts 2 by the descend of the Holy Spirit, He (the Holy Spirit) gave the apostles the gift of speaking in tongues and they were able to minister

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to the multicultural and varied language representation of people groups in Jerusalem on that day in their various languages (Acts 2:4-11) and the people heard and understood the words that were spoken. Acts 2:7-8 affirms: "then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?"

In Acts 10, at the home of Cornelius, Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (verse 47). The phrase "as we have" is crucial to the understanding of the nature of the manifestation of the gift of speaking in tongues in this context. Peter implied

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that the way it happened in Acts 2, it also happened in Cornelius' home and since the believers in Acts 2 were baptized (verse 41), he also argued that Cornelius and his household be baptized and they were baptized (10: 48).

Some Falsehood about Speaking in Tongues

- It is heavenly language
- The demons cannot understand it
- It is a sign of being born again
- It is a sign of being filled with the Holy Spirit

Some Points to Consider

- Paul wrote to the first epistle to the Corinthians to correct series of problems (internal division

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and misunderstanding Christian leadership 1:10 - 4:21; spiritual immaturity 3:1 - 4:16; lack of discipline in the church 5:1-16; litigations against fellow believers 6:1-8; impurity, especially sexual 6:9-20; marriage, celibacy and divorce 7:1-40; foods sacrificed to idols 8:1- 11:1; the role of women in church 11:2-16; Lord's Supper 11:17-34; spiritual gifts and speaking in tongues 12:1 - 14:40; resurrection of the dead 15:1-58) that were threatening the unity of the church and spiritual growth of its membership.

- 1 Corinthians 14 is not prescriptive (instruction to follow) on the gift of speaking in tongues, rather, it was descriptive (what was

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happening) of the church at Corinth.

- All the biblical instances of the manifestation of the gift of speaking in tongues were existing human languages understood by the hearers (Acts 2:7-12; 10:44-46), in fact Paul declares: "But now brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teachings?" 1 Corinthians 14:6 NASB.
- Tongues are a sign for unbelievers (1 Cor 14:22), to manifest the power of the gospel, overcome their unbelief and communicate the good news of the gospel to them.
- The misuse of the gift of tongues

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and glossolalia created disorder in worship at the church in Corinth (1 Cor 14:26-40) and Paul called for order in the church and reminded the believers in Corinth that God is orderly (verses 33, 40).

- There is no record or evidence in Greek texts or other sources, regarding the phenomenon of glossolalia in the early church.

Some Common Sense Reasoning

- If speaking in tongues (glossolalia) is heavenly language, how come on the day of Pentecost (the very first manifestation of the gifts), the people there present declared: ""Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it

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that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?" Acts 2:7-8.

- If speaking in tongues is heavenly language, who should better understand it? The Satan and the demons (fallen angels) who were cast out of heaven and had spoken the language or the professing believer who claims to be speaking the same language which he or she had never learned or known?
- How can human beings who had never been to heaven expect to speak in heavenly language to confuse demons who had lived in heaven and spoken the language of heaven?
- If speaking in tongues were a sign of being filled with the Holy Spirit, does it presume or mean

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that Jesus, the apostles and believers in Christ who did not speak in tongues (glossolalia) until the 1900 experience of Agnes Ozman were not filled with the Holy Spirit?

- If speaking in tongues were meaningless syllables or unknown tongues that could not be decoded, how then could Paul ascertain that he spoke in more tongues more than the members of the church of Corinth (14:18).

In essence, biblical speaking in tongues refers to speaking a language that is foreign to the speaker but understood by the hearer(s), for the purpose of proclaiming the good news of the gospel of Christ (Acts 1:8). It is a sign to unbelievers .

Finally

My utmost endeavor in this article is to bring to your knowledge and/or reassure you that IT NOT TOO LATE TO MEND YOUR WAYS WITH GOD. God desires you to experience the fullness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (including the gifts of tongues). If Paul who considered himself the worst of sinners (1 Tim 1:15) could be accepted and became very useful to the body of Christ (the church); if David could be forgiven of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11 & 12); if Peter could be forgiven of denial of Christ (Matt 26:69-75); if the criminal on the cross could be forgiven (Luke 23:40-43); then you too can be forgiven and accepted by God. In fact, if we were good, there wouldn't have been pain, sorrow, betrayal, hate, greed, sickness, diseases, weeping, and there

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wouldn't have been the need for God to incarnate humanity and die the shameful death on the cross. But because all humanity has sinned and fallen short of God's standard (Romans 3:23), He invites you and me to "Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD, Though your sins be as scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they be red like crimson, They shall be as wool" Isa 1:18 NKJV. God is very willing and ready to save you, He says: "As surely as I live, says the sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of wicked people. I only want them to turn from their wicked ways so they can live. Turn! Turn from your wickedness, O people of Israel! Why should you die?" Eze 33:11 NLT. The choice is yours; today you can choose to be saved. It's simple!

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If you have been convicted by the Holy Spirit, sincerely ask God to forgive you of all your past sins and prayerfully invite Him into your life as your LORD and personal saviour. Ask for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to be manifested in your life. Perhaps, you have never done this before and wondering how and where to begin. Just begin right where you are and tell Him how you feel about your life and what you want Him to do for you. God is present and waiting for you. No special preparation or form is needed, just talk to Him by faith (believing He is) as you would to a friend, and you're already on the way into a journey of everlasting joy and fulfilment. Please, do not procrastinate, **DO IT NOW** and be blest for the rest of your life.