

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

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Recently, I have been asked to present the teaching of the scriptures on the subject of "speaking in tongues." The Greek word from which we get this phrase is glossalia, which gives us the English word glossalalia. It is a Biblical concept and, therefore, can be studied in the scriptures. Specifically, our concern is to know whether it is possible for people today to speak in tongues.

Half a dozen years ago an upsurge of interest in the subject suddenly blossomed in this country and in Canada. Secular newspapers and magazines suddenly began to feature it. Religious journals began to carry articles concerning tongues. Certain churches--primarily holiness groups--had long featured speaking in tongues as a major doctrine and practice, but this new upsurge of interest introduced speaking in tongues into some of the large, formal, respected, major religious bodies. The movement came suddenly and began to decline just as suddenly. Today the movement has declined until almost nothing is being said in the secular press and very little is being written even in the religious journals across the country.

The real issue is "Are these modern-day cases of speaking in tongues real or imagined? Does the Holy Spirit really come into a person and cause him to speak in tongues as it did in apostolic times? Or, is this phenomenon a spiritually excited person uttering nonsense syllables in a semi-hypnotic state? Is it real or is it a delusion?"

Let us begin our study of the scriptures on this matter with the scene of Christ preparing to leave the earth? He planned to leave the apostles to establish his kingdom and to proclaim his gospel to the whole world. He promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide them and to help them. Note Matt. 10:19-20, where Jesus said, "Be not anxious how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you." Even closer to his departure, Jesus said this concerning the Holy Spirit, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I go, I will send him unto you. And he, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment...Howbeit when he, the Spirit of Truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth."

In Mark's account of the life of Christ, the final paragraph in his book gives Jesus' great commission to his disciples in these words, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned. And these signs shall accompany them that believe: in my name shall they cast out demons; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall in no wise hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken unto them, was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by the signs that followed." (Mark 16:15-20). The last expression is the key expression in this whole matter, "Confirming the word by the signs that followed." Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide the apostles in their teaching and to provide miraculous acts that would confirm the word which they preached.

In the New Testament we read of Christ having the Holy Spirit without measure. (John 3:34). The New Testament speaks of others receiving the Holy Spirit in different measures, or different ways. We read of those who were baptized with the Holy Spirit, the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit. Others received the miracle-working measure. All of us who become Christians receive the normal or ordinary measure of the Holy Spirit. Let us notice in some detail the scriptures that teach these different workings of the Holy Spirit.

The Baptismal Measure

On the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem the apostles received the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit. The account in the scriptures reads, "And when the day of Pentecost was now come, they were all together in one place. (This passage refers to the apostles since they were the antecedent of the pronoun "they" in the text.) And suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them tongues like as of fire and it sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

Now notice especially that the tongues spoken here were not "unknown tongues," but rather real languages known by people who lived in different sections of the world. Our text continues, "Now there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound was heard, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speaking in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying, Behold, are not all these that speak Galileans? And how hear we, every man in our own language wherein we were born?" Then the names of the sixteen different nations represented at Jerusalem are given, after which the text continues, "We hear them speaking in our tongues the mighty works of God. And they were all amazed, and were perplexed, saying one to another, What meaneth this?" (Acts 2:1-12).

The miracle performed on this occasion was tremendous and was especially suited to convey to the great multitude who heard Peter and the other apostles preach, and they were spokesmen for God. Everyone heard in his own native language, which means that the apostles spoke real languages which they themselves had never learned in the ordinary way. The multitude was so impressed by this authentication or endorsement of the message which the apostles spoke that three thousand of them became Christians that day. The purpose of the miracle was to prove that God was with these men in their preaching.

The only other time in the New Testament when we read of the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit is in connection with the conversion of Cornelius. After Peter had been shown by a miracle that Gentiles were to be welcome in the Lord's church, he went to the household of Cornelius in Caesarea and preached. While still preaching, Peter was interrupted as this account shows, "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all them that heard the word. And they of the circumcision that believed were amazed, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit. Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." (Acts 10:44-48).

For a Jew to eat with Gentiles and for a Jew to baptize Gentiles was unheard of. Quite understandably, Peter had to face inquiring questions shortly thereafter when he returned to Jerusalem. He answered the brethren there who were disturbed by his action by pointing out, "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, even as on us at the beginning. I remembered the word of the Lord, how he

said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit." Only twice in the New Testament do we read of the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit. Only on Pentecost and at the household of Cornelius was the Spirit poured out and the people spoke in tongues, showing God's endorsement or approval. We have no further record in all of the New Testament of the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit. We can conclude, then, that this was a unique experience and that it has not continued down to the present day.

The Miracle-Working Measure

When the Lord left the earth he needed messengers to proclaim his gospel to all mankind and he needed in some manner to help make this message believable. Christ therefore gave his apostles special power to convey to others the ability to work miracles through the laying on of the apostles' hands. We have a number of examples of this in the scriptures: For example, when Philip the evangelist preached in Samaria a number of people were converted to Christ. Not being an apostle, Philip had no power to lay hands upon them and to convey to them miracle-working powers. "Now when the apostles that were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: who, when they were come down prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit: for as yet it was fallen upon none of them: only they had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then laid they their hands upon them, and they received the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:14-17).

Another example of conveying the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit is found in Acts 19 where the apostle Paul taught twelve men at Ephesus more fully the way of the Lord and then conveyed this power upon them. We read, "And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophecied." (Acts 19:6). In order to advance the Cause of Christ a select number of Christians received the laying on of the apostles' hands so that they could work miracles and thereby cause the people to believe their preaching of the gospel. Notice that this miracle-working power came exclusively with the laying on of the apostles' hands. This means that when the apostles died, within one generation this miraculous power was extinct. Not since the day of the apostles has this power been conveyed to others.

Such Miracles To Cease

In the beginning period of the church it was God's plan to show his approval and endorsement of the preaching of the gospel by allowing his spokesmen to have miraculous power. However, it was not God's plan for this to continue throughout the Christian era. Let us notice carefully Paul's writings to the Corinthians, which shows that the day of such miracles was to cease.

To the Corinthians Paul wrote, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant...Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit...For to one is given through the Spirit the word of wisdom; and to another the word of knowledge, according to the same Spirit: to another faith in the same Spirit; and to another gifts of healings, in the one Spirit; and to another workings of miracles; and to another prophecy; and to another discernings of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; and to another the interpretation of tongues: but all these worketh the one and the same Spirit, dividing to each one severally even as he will." Notice in this passage that there are nine gifts (each underlined) which the Holy Spirit provided for the Christians at Corinth on whom the apostle Paul conveyed this power by the laying on of his apostolic hands.

Toward the end of the chapter he continues, "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then miracles, then

gifts of healings, helps, governments, divers kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? have all gifts of healings? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? But desire earnestly the greater gifts. And moreover a most excellent way show I unto you." (I Cor. 12:1, 4, 8-12, 28-31).

At this point the apostle Paul continues, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." Notice the strong emphasis on love as contrasted to the miraculous gifts which the Holy Spirit provided. They were to serve a necessary purpose, but the deep, permanent part of Christianity was love.

Shortly thereafter in the same text Paul wrote, "Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall be done away. For we know in part, and we prophecy in part; but when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away...But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three: and the greatest of these is love." (I Cor. 13:1-2, 8-10, 13). In other words, when the full, complete revelation of the gospel of Christ was made known, when the church had been fully established, when the miracles had been performed authenticating the gospel, and when all of this had been written down in a permanent inspired record, miraculous gifts were no longer needed. John 20:30-31 reads, "Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name."

The miracles of the Holy Spirit were provided to authenticate the spoken word. This purpose having been served, they no longer were needed and therefore ceased. This can be seen more fully if one asks himself the question, "Did Christ need to be crucified and to rise from the dead again and again, year by year, down through the centuries?" This supreme miracle was performed once for all time, and with the testimony of competent witnesses in the scriptures, it need not be performed year by year or even century by century. It serves for all time, now that we have the inspired record of it. So also with the other miracles.

What About Tongues Today?

We believe that we have shown that all miraculous acts, performed by the agency of men, no longer are needed since they have served their God-given purpose. This would also mean that speaking in tongues, along with the others, is now obsolete, having completed its usefulness. However, let us look even further at this miraculous act which was possible in the first century. H. Leo Boles wrote concerning this matter, "There are eight writers of the New Testament--Matthew, Mark, Luke, Peter, Paul, James, John and Jude. There are twenty-seven books of the New Testament; there are twenty-one books of letters written to individual Christians, churches, and groups or churches. Paul wrote thirteen or fourteen of these letters. There are twenty-seven churches mentioned by name in the New Testament. Paul is the only writer that discussed the gift of speaking in other tongues. He wrote not a word on the subject of tongues to the church at Rome, Ephesus, Colosse, Thessalonica, Philippi, or the churches in Galatia. He wrote a letter or letters to all of these churches, but said nothing about the gift of speaking in tongues. Neither did he mention the subject in his epistles to Timothy, Titus, or Philemon. James did not mention the speaking in tongues in his general epistle; John, who wrote five books of the New Testament does not mention the subject. Even Peter, the spokesman on the day of Pentecost, who evidently had the gift of speaking with tongues, did not mention the subject in writing his two letters. It is a strange

omission indeed if the gift of tongues was an essential part of the Christian experience or if it was to be perpetuated in the church of the Lord's people." (The Holy Spirit, pp. 179-180).

Immediately after naming the nine miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit in I Cor. 12, and after pointing out that all these gifts would cease in I Cor. 13, the apostle Paul then deals specifically with this miraculous gift which was available to certain Christians during that first Christian generation. In this chapter the apostle Paul is showing that speaking in tongues is one of the lesser gifts of the Holy Spirit. Far more important is edification or teaching. He concludes this emphasis by saying, "I thank God, I speak with tongues more than you all: howbeit in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, than I might instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue." (I Cor. 14:1-5, 18-19). Even in the miracle-working age, speaking in tongues was a lesser gift.

A few verses later Paul wrote, "Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to the unbelieving: (Here, we might think of Pentecost, when speaking in tongues was a sign to those who did not believe.) but prophesying is for a sign, not to the unbelieving, but to them that believe." (I Cor. 14:22).

Paul gives a direct commandment concerning the matter of speaking in tongues in these words, "If any man speaketh in a tongue, let it be by two, or at the most three, and that in turn, and let one interpret: but if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church, and let him speak to himself, and to God." (I Cor. 14:27-28). Here is the direct command that says that men must not speak in tongues, unless there is someone present who knows the language and can interpret.

How far this is from those who speak unintelligible jargon and say that no interpretation is possible or desirable! Just here it might be well to point out that the scriptures never use the expression "unknown tongues," which is so often used by people who believe that this miraculous gift is still available. The Bible never uses this expression. When the King James translators used it, it marked the word "unknown" in italics, indicating that the translators had added this word, thinking that it would smooth out the thought. The original manuscripts do not use a word which means "unknown tongues." The tongues spoken by these early Christians were languages that were capable of being understood and the requirement was placed upon those exercising this gift of providing an explanation along with the speaking in tongues.

Conclusion

Those who feel that they are able in this day and age to speak in tongues as did some of the early Christians who had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or on whom the apostles' hands had been laid, are mistaken. In a period of emotional excitement, it may be possible for them to so lose themselves as to utter meaningless sounds in a semi-hypnotic state, but to claim that this is identical with the speaking in tongues of the early Christian era is far from the truth.

The purpose of this type of miracle has long since ceased. The practice has long since become obsolete. Even in that first century speaking in tongues was not considered as important as faith, hope, and love. Let us turn our attention to these qualities and display them in our lives, rather than be concerned about a spiritual gift for which we have come nineteen centuries too late.
