

Can Christians Today Have the Gift of Speaking in Tongues?

By Eric V. Snow

Is speaking in tongues a gift of God or a deception of the Devil? Can someone speak in tongues without it being either? Can Christians today truly have this gift? Or was miraculously speaking in other languages a gift limited to the first century and the early church? Are “tongues” just other human languages, such as Chinese or Arabic, or are they special angelic languages? Must Christians speak in tongues before they can have salvation? Can people correctly speak in tongues during a church service when no one translates those tongues for others present? Are there ways today to scientifically investigate the claims of Pentecostalists that didn't exist in the past? These questions and others are answered below. The Pentecostalist and Charismatic movement's claim that Christians today have the gift of speaking in tongues is shown to be invalid, for the Biblical reasons explained below.

Much of the basic issue about the Charismatic movement's claims concerns whether the "tongues" in question have to be real human languages. Furthermore, most of the Biblical data bearing on this controversy about speaking in tongues is found in three chapters of the Bible: Acts 2 and I Corinthians 12 and 14. So this doctrine doesn't require a huge study to figure out, unlike the case for whether works contribute to the salvation process or not, or whether God is a Trinity or not. Furthermore, the last two passages are also about how to conduct church services in general, not merely about how to administer the gift of speaking in tongues during church services. And I Cor. 12 is much broader in scope than being just about speaking in tongues: It makes the well-known analogy between the church and Jesus' body. It points out that different parts (church members) have different functions as God allows them to have, as per the gifts they are given.

Are “Tongues” Just Other Human Languages?

Now, if we use the Bible to interpret the Bible, rather than reading into a given passage possibly preconceived ideas, we'll find that the gift of tongues was the ability to speak other human languages, such as Japanese, Quechua, or Amharic. On the day of Pentecost, one of the annual Holy Days listed in Leviticus 23, the Holy Spirit first came en masse to a large group of (seemingly average) people at once. Acts 2:4 states what happened miraculously in a nutshell: "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." Now, were these angelic languages or some other special language of the Holy Spirit unknown to other

human beings? What does the Bible itself say? Verses 5-6: "And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. [They were pilgrims in town visiting for this special annual Holy Day--EVS] And when this sound [from the Spirit's arrival] occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language." In verses 9-11 is a list of all the places/nations these Jews from around the known world had come. Yet, they could understand the 120 disciples of Jesus as they spoke. Interestingly enough, the miracle was as much in the hearing as in the speaking, for these people could understand what was being said.

So, in a typical Charismatic service today, do most or any of the people actually understand what those supposedly speaking in tongues are actually saying? Someone may claim to have the gift of interpretation of tongues, but it's hardly like the whole gathered group can understand what's being said as it is originally spoken. So that's a key difference between what happened in Acts 2 and today's Pentecostalist services. Notice how the miracle in Acts 2 was the opposite of what occurred at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:6-8, in which people were miraculously made to **not** understand each other.

Did Paul Speak with the Tongues of Angels?

In Mark 16:17, we find the gift of speaking in tongues would appear among true Christians: "And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues." Now, how do we know that this gift wouldn't be, say, the ability for a native monolingual Spanish speaker to suddenly speak Chinese or Navaho? After all, if someone spoke (say) Urdu around me, as a number of my college roommates did who were from Pakistan, I wouldn't be able to understand them any more than if it was an alleged angelic language. Now, it is true, that Paul said hypothetically (using an "if") that if he spoke with the tongues of men and of angels, but didn't have love, it would be like making noise on instruments (See I Cor. 13:1). Speaking conditionally, he said, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels . . ." But should this be taken as a literal statement of fact? Notice this isn't a flat statement, but a conditional, a hypothetical. Do we then take literally his other conditions before saying love is of much greater importance also literally, as flat statements? Would we ever have knowledge of all mysteries? Would we ever have all faith, such as to literally move mountains? (Verse 2) Would we ever give up all our possessions to the poor and have our dead bodies burned? (Verse 3) Notice he said if these hypotheticals were true, but that he didn't have love, it would be of no value. Therefore, I Cor. 13:1 shouldn't be taken as a statement of fact, but rather a what-if hypothetical about if one had a particular gift in an overwhelming measure, but if one still lacked love, it would be of no value. After all, could Paul speak all human languages? I seriously doubt it, despite he said he spoke more tongues than all the Corinthian Christians together (I Cor. 14:17). So why should we believe he spoke angelic ones also?

Doctrines that assert believers can have the gift to speak in the tongues of angels should be built upon the flat statements or assertions of Scripture, not hypotheticals.

Are Interpreters Required When Someone at Church Publicly Speaks in Tongues?

Another major problem with standard Pentecostalist services is that they often aren't conducted in an orderly fashion in accordance with the directions given in I Cor. 14. For example, if someone speaks in a tongue, but he has no interpreter, he should remain silent. The gift has to be regulated administratively within the church even when its manifestations are authentically a gift from God (verses 27-28): "If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God." So if a lot of people speak in tongues all at the same time but no one understands or interprets them, it can't be a true gift from God, but some kind of error or deception is happening. Paul also said to speak in a tongue was a wasted effort when no one could understand what was being said (verses 9, 11, 16-19): "So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. . . . If you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say 'Amen' at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue." After all, if someone stood up, and spoke Chinese for an hour at services in a sermon, I wouldn't understand a word of it. Paul in this chapter's context interpreted tongues as regular human languages (verses 10-11): "There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the **world [not heaven]**, and none of them is without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me." Obviously, these aren't angelic languages or some special language of the Holy Spirit. Rather, it would be as if I started to speak, and someone heard Arabic or Swahili.

How Can Tape Recordings Be Used to Test the Claims of Pentecostalists?

Now today the Charismatic movement's claims can be tested in ways that didn't exist in the past. For example, suppose some Pentecostalists assert that they can interpret tongues. Here's a practical way to test whether anyone can really interpret tongues or not: Tape record what is said to be a tongue. Then apply these two approaches: 1. After an investigator tapes the Pentecostalist

service during which this alleged gift manifested itself, he could play back the tape for the purported interpreters separately from each other. Do their interpretations agree? If they don't, something bogus is taking place in the speaking, the hearing, or both. If God is inspiring the interpreters, they should interpret the tape recording identically. 2. After making the tape recording, the researcher could check whether or not highly repetitious phrases or sounds occurred, transcribe them phonetically, and then ask (cf. Matthew 6:7), "Would God would miraculously inspire 'vain repetitions' in His people?" Does this supposed "tongue" have a "vocabulary" of highly repetitious sounds or "words," in a way a normal English speech or conversation would never be constructed? Does its sounds resemble a Hindu mantra's? From our knowledge of actual human languages, could we say such sounds or repetitious noises were actual words being spoken in coherent statements that have meaning? Or are they just noises with less meaning than (say) what whales make to each other in the oceans? Another interesting approach would be to see if there are other (false) religions (Hinduism would be a good place to start) that have prophets making similar sounds to what occur among Charismatics, who should believe that Christianity is the only true faith (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). If the same sounds occur, it's a sure sign of something kind of psychological self-deception or even demonic manifestation is happening.

Can People Speak in Tongues Without Help from God or Satan?

Historically the pagans in Corinth (and elsewhere in the Roman Empire anciently) worked themselves up into an ecstatic frenzied state of euphoria similar to what many Pentecostalists say they experience today. In the context of citing a scholar of the Roman Empire's mystery religions, John F. MacArthur Jr., in "Charismatic Chaos" (p. 164) describes how the human mind psychologically could work itself up into an emotional/psychological state of ecstasy: "The worshiper would get into a state where his mind would go into neutral and his emotions would take over. The intellect and conscience would give way to passion, sentiment, and emotion. This was ecstasy, an intoxicating condition of euphoria." Nor is everyone who claims to be speaking in tongues is demon-possessed or demon-influenced. People apparently can work themselves up into these manifestations in ways that don't have much directly to do with God or Satan. Considered purely on a scientific and rational basis, the human mind and its relationship to the brain even today remains a rather mysterious faculty/organ. We humans can do all sorts of odd things when under the influence of hypnotism, mesmerism, or some other psychologically or emotionally induced state.

Is MacArthur's "Charismatic Chaos" Always Correct?

Now John F. MacArthur Jr.'s book, "Charismatic Chaos," is a useful book to read on this general subject. But he goes too far in certain ways in attacking the claims of Charismatics. For example, I think this gift is theoretically possible even today among true believers, but I don't believe presently any authentic manifestations of it occur. I don't see any truly convincing evidence that it exists reliably in the true Church of God today, but that may change shortly before Jesus returns (cf. Acts 2:17). After all, the Two Witnesses will prophesy, and they will be human beings who will be killed before being resurrected miraculously and then ascending to heaven (Rev. 11:3-13). It's a poor argument to claim this gift passed with the closing of the canon of Scripture. That meaning that has to read into I Cor. 13's discussion of tongues ceasing and the perfect's arrival. Rather, this text (vs. 8-10, 12) refers to Jesus' return and/or the Restoration of All Things.

Does the Bible Teach About Two Types of Speaking in Tongues?

The distinction that has been made about two types of tongues ("prayer language"/"public language") is an artifice to get around the texts that regulate speaking in tongues so that people can still do whatever they want. This distinction has to be artificially read into Scripture (i.e., eisegesis). A similar claim is to say everyone has to speak in tongues after being baptized, but that not everyone afterwards has to speak in tongues, which almost makes this gift a condition to salvation. Consider this: If this minister is praying in public, then he is bound by the same restrictions as he would be if he were preaching from the pulpit. Suppose he suddenly breaks into some unknown language. So long as the ungifted are around him, and no interpreter is present, he should be silent then when it comes to his (alleged) gift: "Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified" (I Cor. 14:16-17).

Is Speaking in Tongues a Condition for Salvation?

It's a Pentecostalist overkill to assert that Christians need to speak in tongues (i.e., 17th century King James Version English for "languages") in order to worship God correctly. It's not a requirement to speak in tongues to be a Christian, as Paul shows in I Cor. 12:30: "All do not speak with tongues, do they?" See also I Cor. 14:16, 23-24. It should never be deemed a condition to salvation that someone has to speak in tongues first, for that's merely one more version of salvation by works. As noted already above, most of the discussion about tongues comes from about three chapters of the Bible (Acts 2, I Cor. 12, 14). Why does this subject consume so much of modern Christianity's time and energy despite it doesn't take up much space in Scripture? The famous "love chapter" of I Cor. 13 remains very relevant to Christians today when discussing

the claims of Pentecostalists. As I Cor. 13's emphasis on love shows in this very context, our priorities may not be right then, if Charismatics claim others aren't Christian (or fully good Christians) if they haven't spoken in tongues. This very passage is, in part, a response to people who over-emphasized the importance of spiritual gifts compared to love. Love is more important than faith and hope, or any spiritual gift such as speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, or prophesying.

Can Christians Have Spiritual Gifts While Deliberately and Systematically Disobeying God's Law?

Now can someone really have long-term true spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, while systematically disobeying as a matter of public teaching and deliberate personal practice major commandments of God? This isn't about temporary weakness or occasional sins, but constant, intentional disobedience to God's law. What did Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount? "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'" (Matt. 5:21-23). True, one could argue about whether this text describes gifts that came from God, or counterfeit gifts that came from Satan. After all, Satan certainly does have the power to do miracles also (Rev. 13:13; II Thess. 2:9; Ex. 7:11-12, 22). It's a very dangerous teaching to believe all miracles must be from God. As Scripture warns us (I John 4:1): "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world." One way to "test the spirits" is to consider whether their alleged spokesmen are actually obeying God's law. As the man born blind that Jesus miraculously healed told the questioning Jews (John 9:31): "We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him." If a Pentecostalist claims to have special spiritual gifts from God, but isn't obeying God as a matter of systematic conduct, could he really retain those gifts long term? That is, if someone really has the gift to heal, prophesy, speak in tongues, etc., he or she will be drawn to know all of God's truth required for salvation eventually. The Bible teaches that Christians shouldn't work on the seventh-day of the week, from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday (Exodus 20:8-11). Instead of mentioning Easter or Christmas, the Bible tells us to observe the seven Biblical Holy Days listed in Leviticus 23, such as Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Last Great Day. The Bible also commands Christians to love their enemies (Matt. 5:38-48), which therefore logically includes their not killing their enemies on the battlefield. So if someone says they speak in tongues, but systematically disobeys the seventh-day Sabbath, totally ignores the seven Holy Days, and believes it's fine for Christians to wage war, how likely is their gift really from God?

When Did the Apostles First Fully Receive the Holy Spirit?

Evidence that the disciples/apostles didn't receive the Holy Spirit until Pentecost comes from what could be called the "gentile Pentecost" at Cornelius' household. Here God had a miraculous, publicly noticed receipt of the Holy Spirit by the gentiles in order to show He didn't play favorites spiritually (at least permanently, in His plan for humanity). Notice Acts 10:44-47, especially the last verse: "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, 'Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?'" If the gentiles received the Holy Spirit just as the apostles did, then they received it on Pentecost, when similar publicly noticed miraculous events took place. It's true the disciples made use of the Spirit before being converted at Pentecost, such as when they cast out demons. But it's necessary to make a distinction between having the Spirit with you and having the Spirit in you. Notice John 14:17: "The Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you." The Spirit was with them, but not in them to give them salvation.

Will All Tongues Always Be from the Devil in the Future?

As explained in detail above, true Christians should examine the present-day purported manifestations of the gift of speaking in tongues very skeptically. As a matter of religious epistemology ("how do we know that we know"), belief in the Bible's text should override belief in any personal experiences that would seem to contradict its teachings. But this gift should not be always in the future automatically be rejected as the result of demonic influence. There's nothing in Scripture that explicitly says this gift passed away permanently after the writing of the Bible was completed around 100 A.D. The miraculous gifts of prophesying and speaking in other human languages could well return to the true Church of God shortly before Jesus returns. After all, aren't we in the latter days, not long before Jesus returns? Wouldn't this text (Joel 2:28-29), quoted by Peter (Acts 2:17-18) on the Day of Pentecost in 31 A.D., apply then even more forcibly in the years to come? "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."