

What Does the Bible Have to Say About Speaking in Tongues?

By Pastor Mark Tossell

Introduction:

* As Bible-believing Christians, it is imperative that we accept the judgment of the Word of God as **final**. The Bible is our complete, final, undisputable authority in all matters of faith and practice. Many churches today are placing personal experience above Scripture, and placing **emotion** and subjective judgment ahead of **truth**.

We do not test truth by experience - we test experience by truth.

2 Timothy 3:16 "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

The Bible says that if we trust our own heart, our own judgment more than Scripture, we are fools:

Proverbs 28:26 "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered."

Proverbs 12:15 "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise."

* If your ideas about tongues disagree with the Bible, will you humble yourself and obey Scripture? Or will you cling to your opinions, or the teachings of some man, rather than bow to the authority of the Bible?

John 17:17 "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."

* **Don't believe everything you read or hear - look to the Word for confirmation.** Take the time to **study** the Bible. **You don't need to pray about something being acceptable to God if His Word shows you that it is unacceptable.** For example, we don't need to pray about whether we should steal or lie or get drunk, because God tells us that those actions are **unacceptable**. We must **study** to find the answers in the Bible.

2 Timothy 2:15 "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

Acts 17:10-11 "And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they **received the word** with all readiness of mind, and **searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.**"

* The word tongue or tongues is mentioned in 56 references in the New Testament. 26 of these verses refer to the supernatural gift of speaking in tongues. The references are found only in the books of Mark (1 verse), Acts (5 verses), and 1 Corinthians (20 verses). The gift of tongues is not mentioned once in any of the epistles after 1 Corinthians.

**** Let us see what the Bible says about the gift of tongues:**

1. What are tongues in the Bible?

The typical charismatic perspective concerning tongues is that it is a mystical ability that somehow operates in a person's spirit but utterly bypasses the mind. Some are even told they must switch off their mind to allow the "gift" to function. Charismatics typically describe tongues as an ecstatic experience that arouses the spirit in a way that must be experienced to be appreciated.

The **Biblical** gift of tongues can mean nothing other than the gift of **human languages**. The two Greek words used in the New Testament for "tongues" are *glossa* and *dialektos*. These are defined as:

Glossa - language; the physical organ

Dialektos - dialect

Their use in Acts chapters 2, 10 and 19 confirms this fact. Also, how could there be a gift of interpretation (or translation) if the gift were not a real human language? You can't translate gibberish.

"language" (Acts 2:6) = *dialektos* = "tongue" (Acts 2:8)

Revelation 5:9 "And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and **tongue**, and people, and nation;"

"tongue" (Rev. 5:9) = *Glossa* = "tongue" (Acts 2:4)

There is **not one verse of Scripture** which gives credibility to the idea that the real gift of tongues may be a

“heavenly language” unknown to man.

Acts 2:4 tells us that the Scriptural gift of tongues is **not a learned behaviour**, but an **instant** and **miraculous** use of an **unlearned language**.

Acts 2:4 “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

What passes for tongues in the pentecostal and charismatic movements, often called glossolalia, are **not** true languages, and so are **not** the same thing as the **biblical** gift of tongues.

1 Corinthians 12 and 14 gives the rules for the use of the gift of tongues. For example,

- Tongues are inferior (12:8-10)
- No more than 2 or 3 people are permitted to speak in tongues at church (14:27)
- They must speak one at a time (14:27)
- Tongues must be interpreted (14:13)
- Women are not to speak in church (14:34)
- Tongues must edify **others, not oneself** (14:5,6,26)
- Let all things be done decently and in order (14:40)

Compare these Scriptural rules with the use of so-called tongues (gibberish) today:

- Tongues are elevated as superior
- Many people speak in tongues at once
- There is no interpreter (you cannot translate gibberish) and so the church is not edified
- Women speak in tongues in the church
- Tongues are used selfishly, as an ecstatic experience, and as a so-called intimate language of prayer, rather than used to edify the church
- Confusion usually results

It is important to note that tongues are meant to edify and help others, not the one using the language:

1 Corinthians 14:4,5 “He that speaketh in an unknown tongue **edifieth himself**; but he that prophesieth **edifieth the church**. I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for **greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues**, except he interpret, that the church may receive **edifying**.”

1 Corinthians 14:12 “Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the **edifying of the church**.”

1 Corinthians 14:17 “For thou verily givest thanks well, but **the other is not edified**.”

1 Corinthians 14:19 “Yet in the church I had rather speak **five words with my understanding**, that **by my voice I might teach others** also, than **ten thousand words in an unknown tongue**.”

1 Corinthians 14:26 “How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. **Let all things be done unto edifying**.”

2. What is the Scriptural purpose of tongues?

What is the Scriptural purpose of speaking in tongues? There are 4 purposes given in the Word of God for the gift of tongues. **None of these are for private or selfish use.**

1 Corinthians 14:22 “Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe.”

1. To warn unbelieving Jews to repent because of judgment to come

Isaiah 28:11-12 “For with stammering lips and **another tongue** will he speak to this people. To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear.”

1 Corinthians 14:20-22 “Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men. In the law it is written, **With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me**, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe.”

Acts 2:1-11 “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other **tongues**, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own **language**. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own **tongue**, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the

dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our **tongues** the wonderful works of God.”

Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11,12 as a warning to the unbelieving Jews of the first century. Tongues were a miraculous sign from God in fulfillment of Isaiah 28:11,12 that warned the unbelieving Jews of the passing away of the old covenant (law by Moses) and the establishment of the new (grace by Jesus Christ). God was showing to the Jews His judgment on their unbelief by choosing the Gentiles to be His people through grace. God was about to give the Gospel to the Gentiles because of Israel’s unbelief:

Acts 28:28 “Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it.”

2. To miraculously prove that God was sending the Gospel to the Gentiles

Acts 10:44-48 “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that **on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God.** Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.”

3. To confirm the New Testament Word as from God by signs

Acts 2:22 “Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man **approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs**, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know:”

Acts 2:43 “And fear came upon every soul: and **many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.**”

Acts 14:3 “Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord, which **gave testimony unto the word** of his grace, and granted **signs and wonders to be done by their hands.**”

4. To confirm the apostles as God’s true messengers

Mark 16:20 “And they [the apostles] went forth, and preached every where, **the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.** Amen.”

Hebrews 2:3-4 “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was **confirmed unto us by them that heard him** [apostles]; **God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders**, and with divers **miracles**, and **gifts of the Holy Ghost**, according to his own will?”

2 Corinthians 12:12 “Truly the **signs of an apostle** were wrought among you in all patience, in **signs, and wonders**, and mighty deeds.”

* Some ask, “Weren’t tongues given as proof of a Christian being filled with the Spirit?” **NO.** Consider the following examples of people who were filled with the Holy Spirit but did not speak in tongues:

- Jesus Christ
- John the Baptist
- The 3,000 and 5,000 Jews saved in Jerusalem
- Zacharias (Luke 1:67)
- Peter
- Philip
- The disciples (Acts 15:32)

* The epistles after 1 Corinthians speak **MUCH** about being filled with the Spirit and walking in the Spirit, but mention **NOTHING** about speaking in tongues.

* Then what is the proof of being filled with the Holy Spirit?

- 1) The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22,23
- 2) Singing as in Ephesians 5:18,19
- 3) Giving thanks for all things as in Ephesians 5:20
- 4) Winning souls to Jesus Christ as in Acts 1:8

* Many Christians claim to be filled with the Holy Spirit because they speak in “tongues,” yet most have never one even one soul to Jesus Christ. It is evident that, although they have a religious **experience**, they are certainly **not** filled with the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus said very plainly, “And he saith unto them, Follow me, and **I will make you fishers of men.**” (**Matthew 4:19**)

3. Are tongues necessary today?

* **Why would we need the gift of tongues today?** Consider each of the four purposes listed above:

1. To warn unbelieving Jews to repent because of judgment to come

This purpose has been fulfilled.

2. To miraculously prove that God was sending the Gospel to the Gentiles

This purpose has been fulfilled.

3. To confirm the New Testament Word as from God by signs

This purpose has been fulfilled.

4. To confirm the apostles as God's true messengers

This purpose has been fulfilled.

* **Therefore, there is not ONE Scriptural reason why we should need tongues today.**

It is clear from history the Scriptural gift of tongues ceased at about 63-70 AD. Paul wrote at least 12 epistles after 1 Corinthians and **never** mentioned tongues. **No other epistle** refers to tongues. **None** of the church fathers refer to the gift of tongues. Chrysostom and Augustine, two of the great theologians of the fourth century, stated that tongues were **obsolete**. From the end of the apostolic era to the beginning of the 20th century there were **no genuine occurrences of the gift of tongues**. The only groups that claimed to speak in tongues were **heretics**. The burden of proof for the supposed recent revival of the signs gifts lies squarely on the charismatics' shoulders. **And they have no such proof.**

4. Are tongues a heavenly prayer language?

* Let it be said emphatically that there is **no command** in the New Testament for the Christian to pray in an "unknown language." **NONE**. There is **no example** in the book of Acts or any other book in the New Testament where a Christian prayed in tongues. **NONE**. Then, whose idea was it to "pray" in a "heavenly language?" **Man's, not God's.**

* **What about 1 Corinthians 13:1?**

1 Corinthians 13:1 "Though I speak with the **tongues of men and of angels**, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."

Paul's use of the phrase "tongues of ... angels" is theoretical, when taken in context; he was pushing the bounds of reality in showing the emptiness of works without love. The term "unknown tongue" refers in context to a human language not understood by either the speaker, or the hearers, or both. There is no implication of a mysterious heavenly language, a new language, or ecstatic speech. Paul also talked about understanding all mysteries, and giving his body to be burned, but he certainly had not done either. Note that there is no evidence anywhere in the Bible that even implies that angels have their own language. Every instance in Scripture where an angel speaks, he is speaking in a human language.

* **What about 1 Corinthians 14:14,15?**

1 Corinthians 14:14,15 "For if I pray in an *unknown* tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is it then? **I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.**"

The word "if" is crucial - "...**if** I pray in an unknown tongue." Paul said it is unfruitful to pray in an unknown language, **so he prays with understanding** - in a known language ("I will pray with the understanding also"). He is actually **reproving** people for praying in gibberish, not encouraging them to pray in a mysterious prayer language. **There is not one example in the Bible of anyone praying in an unknown prayer language.**

* **What about 1 Corinthians 14:2-4?**

1 Corinthians 14:2-4 "For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries. But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church."

If you pray in another language while with a group of Christians where no one else knows the language you are using (there is no interpreter), **you understand the prayer and are edified, but no one else is helped** because they don't understand you. If you teach the Word of God so that others will understand it, you are edifying the church. **Paul had already established the principle of unselfishness:**

1 Corinthians 10:23-24 "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but **all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth.**"

1 Corinthians 14:26 "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. **Let all things be done unto edifying.**"

Other Scriptures also enforce the need for unselfishness in our Christian life:

2 Corinthians 12:19 "Again, think ye that we excuse ourselves unto you? we speak before God in Christ: but we do all things, dearly beloved, **for your edifying.**"

Ephesians 4:29 "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, **but that which is good to the use of edifying**, that it may minister grace unto the hearers."

The modern abuse of "tongues" is selfish because they are not used to edify the church, but rather are used for a thrilling, exciting (and addictive) experience.

* **What about Romans 8:26?**

Romans 8:26 "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but **the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us** with groanings which **cannot be uttered.**"

Romans 8:26 cannot be talking about speaking in tongues, because the verse says the groanings of the Holy Spirit cannot be uttered. **He intercedes for us as we are silent** when we don't know what to pray for. The intercessions of the Spirit in Romans 8:26 are:

1. Made by the Spirit, not a man
2. Silent - they cannot be uttered

To use this verse as proof of praying in gibberish is, to say the least, pure foolishness, and even deceitful.

A note about *hermeneutics*, or the science of Bible interpretation:

People who believe in speaking in tongues because of their experience or the experience of someone else usually resort to twisting a few passages of Scripture to support their views. We must remember that there are five well-established principles of sound Bible interpretation which we must follow:

- 1) **The literal principle.** Understand Scripture in its normal sense. God says what He means, and means what He says.
- 2) **The historical principle.** Have some grasp of the cultural, geographical, and political setting of the passage.
- 3) **The grammatical principle.** We have to follow the sequence of the words and phrases to know precisely what the Word of God says.
- 4) **The synthesis principle.** Scripture interprets Scripture. Obscure passages in the Bible may be understood in the light of clearer ones. Never build a doctrine on a single obscure or unclear text.
- 5) **The practical principle.** All Scripture applies to our life in one way or another.

* **What about Ephesians 6:18?**

Ephesians 6:18 "Praying always with all prayer and supplication **in the Spirit**, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints;"

What does it mean to pray "in the Spirit?"

Firstly, every person who is born again is "in the Spirit:"

Romans 8:9 "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."

Secondly, to be in the Spirit means to be under the control of the Holy Spirit, or filled with the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 5:18 "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; **but be filled with the Spirit;**"

Revelation 1:10 "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet,"

Galatians 5:16 "This I say then, **Walk in the Spirit**, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh."

Galatians 5:25 "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit."

The phrase "in the spirit" mentioned 25 times in the NT - only **ONE** reference is in the context of an unknown

language (1 Corinthians 14:2), and that verse is speaking **negatively** of tongues. There is **nothing** about the phrase “praying ...in the Spirit” that implies praying in a “heavenly language.” We are simply supposed to be **filled and controlled by the Spirit** at all times, including when we pray, and to be always led by the Spirit. Remember: the **Spirit of God** will **NEVER** lead you to act **contrary** to the **Word of God**.

5. What are the so-called tongues that are spoken today?

Starting with Charles Fox Parham and his experiments at the College of Bethel in 1900 and 1901, the members of the pentecostal and charismatic movements have claimed to speak in the Biblical gift of supernatural tongues for the last one hundred years. Since we have shown conclusively that the purposes of tongues were fulfilled in the first century, and that the “tongues” spoken today are certainly not the Scriptural gift of unlearned languages, the question begs to be asked:

What kind of tongues are being spoken today?

There are several possible explanations:

- **Learned behaviour.** This is probably the majority of modern glossolalia.
- **Satanic or demonic ecstatic speech.** There have been documented cases of such tongues used by people involved in false religion and the occult.
- **Psychologically induced phenomenon.** Some psychological patients, for example those experiencing schizophrenia, have shown breakdowns in speech similar to glossolalia.
- **Hypnotic suggestion.**

**** Let it be stated categorically and emphatically that if the tongues used today do not meet the Bible criteria for miraculous tongues, and they do not, then the tongues used today are not from God.**

Some assume that because they see phenomena that appear miraculous, that God is the Power responsible for the signs. However, the Lord Jesus warned us that such is not always the case:

Matthew 24:24 “For there shall arise false Christs, and **false prophets**, and shall show **great signs and wonders**; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.”

Conclusion:

The heart cry of every sincere Christian ought to be:

Psalms 19:14 “Let the **words of my mouth**, and the meditation of my heart, **be acceptable in thy sight**, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.”

Is the modern use of tongues acceptable to God? What have we seen from Scripture? The modern use of the so-called gift of tongues obviously is not the same as the supernatural gift of tongues found in the Word of God. The modern counterfeit is not even close to the real thing. **Therefore, if the modern tongues phenomenon does not line up with Scripture, then we must have nothing to do with it.**

“But,” you ask, “what about my experiences with tongues? What about the experiences of so many others who say how wonderful it is?” The use of so-called tongues today is based upon false doctrine. The underlying cause of such false doctrine that abounds in the charismatic movement is that personal experience - and not Scripture - is the foundation of their belief system. Ecstasy, mysticism and emotional experiences are mistaken for spirituality. Christians are told to let go of their mind, to lose control. Christians fall into a trance, faint, or lapse into frenzied behaviour. This has more in common with paganism and the occult than with Bible Christianity. Galatians 5:22,23 tell us that the fruit of the Spirit is temperance, or self-control. That is exactly the opposite of how it should be. Our faith, based upon the Word of God, should provide a basis for experiences. **Authentic experience always happens in response to truth.**

Romans 3:4 “God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.”

**** A final word from Scripture concerning our speech as Christians:**

“Let no corrupt [worthless] communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.” (Ephesians 4:29)