

# “SPEAKING IN TONGUES”

Garland M. Robinson

**A** tongue is “the language used by a particular people in distinction from that of other nations” (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon). “Speaking in tongues” is *always* used this way in the Bible.

The first instance of “speaking in tongues” was at the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. “And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all *one language*...Go to, let us go down, and there *confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech*. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city” (vs. 6-8).

Prior to the tower of Babel, all men spoke the same language, for no other languages existed! For God to “confound their language” was to simply cause them to speak a language which they did not previously know – one they had never studied in order to learn.

“Speaking in tongues” was unheard of again until the beginning of the church of Christ in Acts chapter two. There was a purpose for God causing the people to speak in different languages in Genesis 11 just as there was a purpose for the same type languages spoken in the New Testament and recorded in:

- 1) Acts 2:1-21 (the 12 apostles on Pentecost),
- 2) Acts 10:11 (those at the house of Cornelius),
- 3) Acts 19:1-7 (12 men at Ephesus), and
- 4) I Corinthians chapters 12-14 (some in the church at Corinth).

What men may surmise (guess) to be the purpose, and what the Bible actually says was the purpose, are entirely two different things. Since the New Testament is the book from which all men/women will one day be judged (John 12:48), let it tell us what we need to know concerning “speaking in tongues.”

## MEANING AND USE OF “TONGUES” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The word “tongue” or “tongues” is found 60 times in the English New Testament. Fifty of the sixty times the word “tongues” appears, the Greek word translated is *GLOSSA* (which is the basis for this study). *GLOSSA* simply means: tongue, the little member in the mouth (James 3:5). With the exception of four verses (where it refers to the literal tongue), it has reference in a figurative sense to a “spoken language.” It is used in this latter sense over 90% of the time in the New Testament. In each and every case, it refers to a spoken, intelligible, human language and never anything else.

Twenty-five of the fifty times the word appears, it describes the miraculous phenomenon of “speaking in tongues.” Below, are the verses in which *glossa* appears and how it is used:

- 1) the *literal tongue* (Mark 7:33; Luke 16:24; Acts 2:3; Revelation 16:10),
- 2) a *spoken language* (Mark 7:35; Luke 1:64; Acts 2:11; 2:26; Romans 3:13; 14:11; Philippians 2:11; James 1:26; 3:5,6,6,8; I Peter 3:10; I John 3:18; Revelation 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15),

- 3) *speaking a language by miracle* (Mark 16:17; Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6; I Corinthians 12:10,10,28,30; 13:1,8; 14:2,4,5,5,6,9,13,14,18,19,22,23,26,27,39).

### HOW SOME USE “TONGUES” TODAY

Many religious people today say it has reference in some cases to an “*unknown tongue*,” or “*ecstatic utterance, speech*” – a language, they say, understood and known only to God. “Ecstatic” means: “Relating to, or marked by ecstasy.” “Ecstasy” means: “a state of being beyond reason and self-control.” Therefore, they tell us that when they speak in “unknown tongues” they are not speaking a language known to man, but that God understands. If this be the case, we ought to be able to successfully use this definition in every place the word *glossa* appears.

Notice the following comparison of several verses transposing the word “*language*” with “*ecstatic speech*.”

#### LANGUAGE

**Mark 16:17** “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new *languages*.”

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

**Acts 10:46** “For they heard them speak with *languages* and magnify God.”

**Acts 19:6** “And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with *languages* and prophesied.”

**I Cor. 12:10** “To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of *languages*; to another the interpretation of *languages*.”

#### ECSTATIC SPEECH

**Mark 16:17** “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new *ecstatic speech*.”

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

**Acts 10:46** “For they heard them speak with *ecstatic speech* and magnify God.”

**Acts 19:6** “And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with *ecstatic speech* and prophesied.”

**I Cor. 12:10** “To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of *ecstatic speech*; to another the interpretation of *ecstatic speech*.”

**I Cor. 12:28** “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of *languages*.”

**I Cor. 12:30** “Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with *languages*? do all interpret?”

**I Cor. 13:8** “Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be *languages*, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.”

**I Cor. 12:28** “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of *ecstatic speech*.”

**I Cor. 12:30** “Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with *ecstatic speech*? do all interpret?”

**I Cor. 13:8** “Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be *ecstatic speeches*, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.”

From the scriptures noted above, note the following comparison between “speaking in tongues” in the Bible and the so-called “ecstatic utterances” of today.

**“SPEAKING IN TONGUES”**

1. They were languages they had not studied.
2. Contemporary languages that conveyed meaning.
3. Only one interpretation possible.
4. Emphasis on public demonstration.
5. Nothing to do with maturity and spiritual growth.
6. Did not prove that the “speaker” was in God’s favor.
7. Basically a “sign” to others.

**“ECSTATIC UTTERANCES”**

1. Generally just a collection of sounds called “ecstatic utterances.”
2. Sometimes bits of modern languages or claims concerning some “forgotten language.”
3. Often “interpretations” vary.
4. Present emphasis on private devotional use.
5. Stressed as a sign of growing maturity.
6. Considered a proof of God’s acceptance.
7. Considered basically a “sign” to self.

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| 8. Used to confirm the Word.   | 8. Leads men to subjective authority – away from the objective authority of the Bible.    |
| 9. A unique sign from God.   | 9. Can be psychologically induced.  |
| 10. Could not be duplicated by non-Christians.   | 10. “Ecstatic utterances” found in pagan religions and in sects teaching false doctrines. |
| 11. Never any emphasis on all speaking in tongues.   | 11. All are urged to seek this “gift.”  |
| 12. Specific instructions given for use in assembly: only with an interpreter, only a few in order, no women speaking, orderly, etc. | 12. Often every New Testament instruction is violated.                                    |
| 13. Given Temporarily for a special purpose – to Cease.  | 13. Considered a permanent part of God’s arrangement for the Christian age.               |
| 14. Not emphasized.  | 14. Greatly emphasized.*  |

\*Chart by David Roper, Tract #211, “*Speaking In Tongues*”, Star Bible Pub., Ft. Worth, TX, nd. p.9

## I CORINTHIANS 14 AND ECSTATIC UTTERANCES

I Corinthians 14 is used by modern-day, self-proclaimed “tongue speakers” as a “proof text” for their claims of miraculous endowment. It is obvious their “tongue speaking” is not an intelligent language, so in response, they say no one is supposed to understand because their “unintelligent sounds” are speaking to God, not man, and give verse two as proof of their practice: “*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.*”

The whole context completely refutes their supposed doctrine. The problem in Corinth was their abuse of spiritual gifts, especially “speaking in tongues.” For some reason they coveted this gift above all others and loved to exercise it in the assembly. Paul’s writing of chapters 12-14 was to correct their misuse and explain the true purpose of such miraculous gifts. When Paul said their tongue speaking was “*not unto men, but unto God,*” he simply was indicating that it was not understood by those present, not that it was not intended to be understood. His point is clear that if any spoke in tongues, there must also be one to interpret what was spoken (v.5), else, none would be able to profit from it. He said such utterances were useless. They

were just spoken “*into the air*” (v.9). Even the one speaking in the “tongue” (language) does not benefit from it since no one interprets what he said (v.14). Tongue speaking under such circumstances would be understood by no one but God, so wherein is the benefit to men? It would defeat the whole purpose of speaking in a foreign language since its goal was to communicate the will of God for the purpose of producing faith in the unbeliever!

Tongues were for a “*sign*,” not to them that believed (Christians), but to them that did not believe (not Christians) (v.22). Speaking in gibberish and unintelligible sounds would not be a sign to anyone, especially the unbeliever! Such displays would cause the unbeliever to mock and laugh. No miracle of God would ever cause any such thing! All spiritual gifts were designed to build faith in God and his word, not make men ridicule. For one to hear a man speak in his own language fluently, as if it were his native tongue, when in fact it was not, would cause that person to believe that, indeed, a notable miracle had been done. This was the effect on Pentecost, “*...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? We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God*” (Acts 2:6-8, 11).

Whenever speaking in tongues was exercised properly in the New Testament, it always accomplished its desired effect — taught men the Word of God through communicable, understandable speech (language). The result was, “*we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.*”

## WHO RECEIVED THE GIFT OF TONGUES?

Select individuals, not every Christian, are the only ones who received the gift to speak in another language. The 12 apostles (Acts 2:1-4), the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:11), the 12 men at Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7), some at the church in Corinth (I Corinthians 12 —14), and undoubtedly others of which we have no record (Note the means of obtaining the ability to speak in languages below). To understand the *purpose* of the gift helps explain *who* received it and *why* it was not for every Christian (see purpose below).

## MEANS OF OBTAINING

The Bible reveals there were only two means through which this gift was received: “Holy Spirit baptism” and “laying on of the apostles hands.”

Acts 2:1-4 speaks of Holy Spirit baptism, “*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.*”

“Laying on of the apostles’ hands” is spoken of in Acts 19:6 and 8:14-18, “*Now when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with*

*tongues, and prophesied.” “Now when the apostles which 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 Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost. And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money....”*

The gift of tongues was never received any other way! However, people today claim they pray and wait for the Spirit to “move them.” Claims are made that “tongues” are for everyone! How unlike the Bible!

### PURPOSE

The purpose of “speaking in tongues” is well defined in the scriptures. It was one of the nine spiritual/miraculous gifts mentioned in I Corinthians 12:7-10. Concerning these gifts, we read in Mark 16:17-18, and 20, *“And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover... And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.”*

As the apostles were preaching a “new doctrine” never before heard, God enabled them to “confirm” their preaching, i.e., make it firm, convincing, irrefutable. This new teaching was from God, not man. *“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe”* (I Thess. 2:13). If we reject God’s word, how then *“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; 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”* (Heb. 2:3-4). God bore witness to their preaching, and did so with miracles!

Performing miracles confirmed the words of the inspired preachers. *“Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did”* (Acts 8:5-6). This was acknowledged by Nicodemus. He *“came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him”* (John 3:1-2). Peter preached on Pentecost, *“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 2:22).

Whether it be speaking in tongues or any of the other gifts, such miracles were not to accommodate the speaker or even the one being acted upon (such as healing). The purpose of a miracle was to produce faith in the heart of the unbeliever. *“Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not”* (I Cor. 14:22). This was the effect

upon those in Samaria in Acts 8:5-6 as noted above! Such miracles even caused some at Lystra to think Paul and Barnabas were gods (Acts 14:8-12). Miracles accomplished, as their object, the producing of faith in those that had seen and heard them.

As per the foregoing, “tongues” were for the purpose to bridge the language barrier and to authenticate the preaching of the Gospel. It confirmed the word that was preached. Non-believers could hear the Gospel in their native tongue and marvel that the men speaking were “*unlearned and ignorant men*” just as we read in Acts 4:13, “*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus.*”

While the church was young and New Testament revelation incomplete, there was a need for the people of each congregation to be taught the Word of God. This was done by the use of several miraculous gifts. The exercise thereof would prove the things said and done to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. God’s choice was to have it “proven” by miracles: healing the sick, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, discerning of spirits, etc. (I Cor. 12:7-10). Without the Gospel being written on paper and able to be distributed, they needed a means to convince their hearers. It was a “sign” to unbelievers (I Cor. 14:22). During the early days of the church, God chose that through this means his word might be quickly dispensed into all nations of men. However, as we will see later in this chapter, once the Word of God was established and recorded for all to read, the need for “speaking in tongues” ceased. Therefore, if “speaking in tongues,” as claimed to be done today, is not for the purpose of confirming the word, it is not essential. If it is for the purpose of confirming the word, the Bible is incomplete! Either way, those who claim the power (ability) to “speak in tongues,” and the message they preach, are both wrong! It attacks the very inspiration of the Scriptures.

### HOW LONG WOULD SPEAKING IN TONGUES LAST?

How long “tongue speaking” would last is clearly defined in I Corinthians 13 – the “love chapter” of the Bible.

The church at Corinth was plagued with a great many problems, one of which was their abuse and coveting of “speaking in tongues” (I Cor. 1:10-11; 12:1). Chapters 12-14 of First Corinthians were written to correct their misunderstanding and abuse of this gift. The whole intent of chapter 13 was to show just how important the gift was and define how long it was to last.

If one did not have proper love, speaking in tongues or any other gift was “nothing.” Note the following examination of I Corinthians 13. “*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*” (v.1). “Tongues” were not that important! The Corinthian church ranked it first, God ranked it last! Beginning in verse eight, Paul defines how long they would last. “*Charity (love) never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.* (v.9) *For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.* (v.10) *But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.*”

When that which is “*perfect is come,*” then “*that which is in part*” shall be “*done away.*” It

would no longer be necessary. Verse eight describes the “part” things as “prophesies,” “tongues,” “knowledge” etc., in other words, the list of spiritual gifts mentioned in 12:7-10. These gifts were given in “parts,” here a little, there a little. When the “perfect thing” comes, the “part things” would “fail,” “cease,” “vanish,” – be done away.

When it is established what the “perfect” is of verse 10, we will then know when the “spiritual gifts” were to cease. Some people say the “perfect” of verse 10 is Jesus Christ at his second coming. This is not possible, not only from the context but also from the use of the word itself. The word “perfect” in I Corinthians 13:10 is *neuter* in the Greek. The “perfect” is a “thing,” not a person. The verse says, when “that” which is perfect is come. Jesus is not a “that,” he is masculine gender, not neuter!

The context of chapters 12-14 is dealing with nine spiritual gifts – their purpose and duration. Their purpose was to guide and direct the infant church in the absence of God’s written revelation (the New Testament). Their duration would be only until God’s written revelation was complete. This is clearly explained in other passages as well. The need for certain individuals and the miraculous gifts they possessed would be only until “*that which is perfect is come,*” the “*unity of the faith*” is come, has been delivered. Notice Ephesians 4:1-16 but especially verses 11-13, “*And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*” The “unity of the faith” HAS come! Jude 3 says it was once and for all time delivered. “*It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.*”

Paul further explains the likeness of spiritual gifts – “speaking in tongues” in particular – as childish, baby things. Contenders for “speaking in tongues” today say the gift is for those spiritually mature. They say it is evidence of one who is “filled with the Holy Ghost.” God says “speaking in tongues” was for the immature, babies, those who were yet children. Verse 11 of I Corinthians 13 says, “*When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*” The Corinthians were crazed with the possession of this gift, yet Paul describes it as childish! When one matures “in the Lord” the childish things are put away, no longer needed. Those longing and praying for it are acting like babies! Instead of being strong in faith, they are weak in faith. They need artificial reinforcement through this means to bolster their lack of faith! When one matures in faith, the baby things (spiritual gifts, I Cor. 13:11) will be put away. When a child grows to maturity, he no longer uses the “baby things” which were once needed. This is the point of the chapter in relation to “speaking in tongues” and the other spiritual gifts!

Paul explains that for the moment (the first century, the infancy of the church), such gifts were necessary because the revelation of the New Testament was not yet complete. “*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known*” (I Cor. 13:13). Revelation was being given part by part. They were only able to see it “darkly,” as if they looked into a glass (mirror) and saw the image faintly, i.e., not clearly. So it was with the giving of the New Testament. They were only catching glimpses, pieces, parts of it. But, when it was complete, the perfect thing “finished,” they would



see it “face to face,” i.e., clearly.

James describes the “perfect thing” as the “perfect law of liberty.” *“But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed”* (James 1:25). The “law of liberty” is the complete New Testament.

W. E. Vine says concerning *GLOSSA* (“speaking in tongues”),

There is no evidence of the continuance of this gift after Apostolic times nor indeed in the later times of the Apostles themselves; this provides confirmation of the fulfillment in this way of I Cor. 13:8, that this gift would cease in the churches, just as would “prophecies” and “knowledge” in the sense of knowledge received by immediate supernatural power (cp. 14:6). The completion of the Holy Scriptures has provided the churches with all that is necessary for individual and collective guidance, instruction, and edification.<sup>1</sup>

The conclusion of I Corinthians chapter 13 shows the importance of that which *abides and remains*, and the unimportance of that which is *temporary*. That which remains after the spiritual gifts have long since been gone is “charity.” *“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity”* (v.13). The point of the chapter is that “spiritual gifts” are temporary but “love” is permanent. If “spiritual gifts” were to last until Jesus comes again, how could love remain? There will be nothing left on earth for anything to remain!

## CONCLUSION

We have seen from this brief study that “speaking in tongues” is not possible today. It is not possible because:

- 1) Holy Spirit baptism is no longer available,
- 2) laying on of the apostles hands is no longer available,
- 3) the New Testament has been completely revealed, and
- 4) they no longer serve a useful purpose.

This is easily understood when one “rightly divides the word” as II Timothy 2:15 sets forth – *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* To properly understand any scripture, one must “handle correctly” the word of God. The Bible is in complete harmony with itself.

To learn the truth on any subject one must gather all the available evidence and then reason, using that evidence, to a logical conclusion. God’s word most definitely sets forth the truth of “speaking in tongues” but leaves it VERY CLEAR concerning its purpose and duration.

One writer has said:

“Without fear of successful contradiction, we may conclude that after the death of the last apostle and the death of the last person upon whom an apostle had laid his hands, there has never been another miracle performed, through the instrument of man, upon this earth.”

“With the gospel revelation completed, established, and confirmed its perpetual validity must be accepted without additions or subtractions:”

“When men claim to speak in tongues, by the power of the Holy Spirit, such is a denial of the power and validity of the gospel! To pervert the gospel, or preach another gospel, though claimed to be revealed from heaven, is to be accursed of God. The inspired apostle concluded: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:6-9).”<sup>2</sup>

References:

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Vine, *“An Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words”*, 1966, Vol. 4, p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> V. E. Howard, *“Speaking in Tongues,” 35 Years ARE YOU LISTENING?,* 1971, p. 479-480.