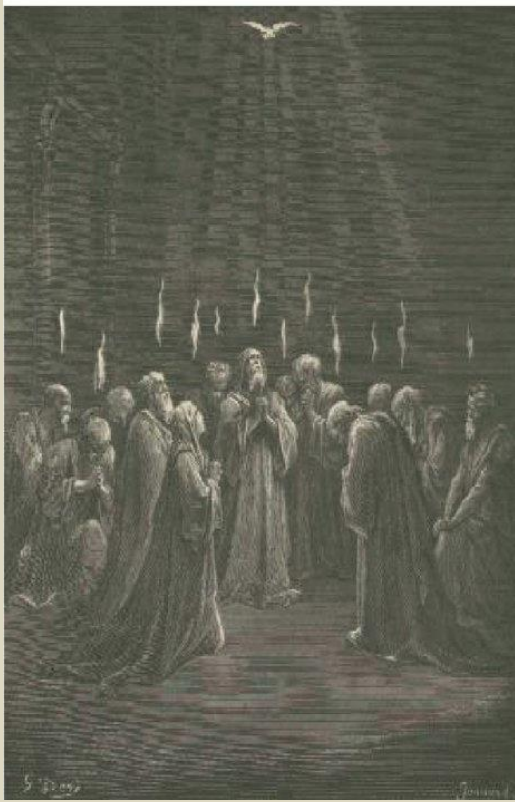


# WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL USE OF TONGUES?



## Q. What is the biblical use of tongues in a Church situation?

This a valid question that has intrigued many Christians. Unfortunately, like several other issues in the N.T., there are differing opinions as the Scriptures "seem" ambiguous or at odds. Therefore, in such cases, it is often difficult to glean a clear-cut directive. Nevertheless, we know there is indeed a God-ordained order regarding this subject for those who desire "His most excellent way." I have pondered this same question many times and only came to a conclusion as I looked at the New Testament as a whole and particularly 1 Corinthians 14 in conjunction with the Book of Acts.

First of all, let us understand that there are three different and unique manifestations of the gift of tongues presented in the N.T. (see 1 Cor. 12:10; notice the verse says, "divers kinds of tongues"), namely...

(1) Tongues, inspired by the Holy Ghost, communicating an earthly language that can be supernaturally heard and understood by other human beings (Acts 2:1-8).

(2) Tongues, inspired by the Holy Ghost, that are either an earthly or heavenly language, and are meant to be understood by men through the means of the supernatural gift of the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 12:10; 14:27-28).

(3) And finally, tongues, inspired by the Holy Ghost, that are heavenly languages, that are for the use of communion, intercession, praise, and worship to God and are not necessarily meant to be understood by men (1 Cor. 14:2).

Another important factor to consider is the context in which the restriction of the use of the gift of tongues is given (1 Cor. 14:27-28). As we read 1 Corinthians 14 we come to understand that the injunction is leveled for two primary reasons: [1] It could cause unbelievers/unlearned to stumble if there is no interpretation, and [2] If un-interpreted, it edifies only the believer speaking/praying in tongues.

Paul is not addressing all meetings of the believers, but only the corporate meeting when instruction from the Word, by the five-fold ministry, was officially planned (something akin to our regular church meetings). This is important for understanding the restriction of the use of the gift of tongues because it was the regular corporate meetings where the unbeliever/unlearned were more likely to attend. It could not mean simply "church" as constituted by the gathering of 2 or 3 saints together, or prayer meetings attended by believers only. Why? Because if so, this would render many God-ordained and Spirit-led meetings as disorderly (as undeniably revealed throughout the Book of Acts when God Himself inspired men to speak audibly in tongues without apparent interpretation and with obviously more than "two or three" doing so by course, Acts 10, 19, etc...).

*Church (Greek) ek-klay-see'-ah; A calling out, i.e. (concretely) a popular meeting, especially a religious congregation, assembly.*

Now, I will attempt to answer this question by going verse by verse through  
1 Cor. 14:1-31:

*1 Cor. 14:1 Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy.*

The Apostle encourages us to pursue spiritual gifts but points out that the preference should be given to edification of the church in the corporate assembly.

*1 Cor. 14:2 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.*

This is obviously the third type of tongues that I mentioned above. It is communion with God and cannot be understood by men. All who are baptized in the Holy Ghost speak/pray with other tongues but all will not necessarily interpret, though they should pray to do so (1 Cor. 14:13).

*1 Corinthians 14:3-5 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. 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.*

Now, the Apostle sets the premise for the remainder of the chapter as he will contrast the uninterpreted gift of tongues and the gift of prophesy, or more accurately, edification of the church to be preferred over edification of ourselves.

*1 Cor. 14:6-9 Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air.*

Verse 6 is essential in understanding the tone and purpose of the entire chapter. The phrase, 'come unto you speaking with tongues' frames the context in which the restrictions communicated later in the chapter are instituted. No doubt, it is worthless to approach the corporate body speaking with an unknown tongue, directing the tongues to them, without interpretation as there is no edification.

*1 Cor. 14:10-12 There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that*

*speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me. Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.*

Again, the Apostle exhorts us to seek the edification of the church. If we cannot understand what is being said in the corporate meeting then it is impossible to receive edification. Expounding upon and declaring the Word of God is the primary purpose for such meetings and this is to take the preeminence.

*1 Cor. 14:13-15 Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret. 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.*

Here, Paul is pointing out that to "speak with unknown tongues" without interpretation is in essence to "pray in tongues." He does not condemn the use of tongues in this manner, but only stresses that it can only edify the one praying. We, as Spirit-filled believers, should pray that God grant us the gift of interpretation of tongues so as to edify the church in the corporate setting. The Apostle, apparently relaying his own experience determines to pray with the spirit as well as the understanding.

*1 Cor. 14:16-17 Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified.*

The key to understanding this passage is to make sure we do not overlook verse 17. Notice the phrase, "the room of the unlearned" which indicates that the Apostle is not speaking of the church here. He is simply pointing out that someone who is unlearned (unfamiliar with the Baptism of the Holy Ghost and the gifts of the Spirit) will not understand the use of tongues nor will he be edified by its use.

*1 Cor. 14:18-19 I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: 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.*

Again, Paul states that in private use, tongues are a great blessing, but in the "church" he prefers ("I had rather") to speak words that can be understood. However, when he uses the term "church" we must understand that he is speaking of the corporate meeting, not simply when he is with other believers. Consider the prohibition of women, who are forbidden to preach/teach in "church". We do not understand this restriction to mean that a woman must never discuss Scripture except alone. Or, that when she is in the company of 2 or 3 other believers she must not discuss or expound upon Scripture, but rather, that she is not to officially teach/govern the church or labor in doctrine. Or, in other words, she is not to serve in the five-fold ministry. Likewise, the restriction of un-interpreted tongues is isolated to the regular corporate meeting.

*1 Cor. 14:21-26 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. If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth. 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.*

Notice the qualification, "If therefore the whole church be come together into one place." This is the key to understanding the restriction given in verse 28. Paul is not speaking about casual meetings or even prayer meetings, but when the whole church is come together in one place. Such language can only mean the official meeting of the body for instruction and edification from the Word of God. So, the restrictions are isolated to the corporate meeting and in the presence of the unbelievers or unlearned. We know that it is not uncommon to have unbelievers at corporate meetings. In such meetings loud and open speaking in tongues is restricted because unless there is an interpreter it becomes disruptive and can be a stumbling block to the unbeliever and the unlearned. However, prayer meetings are for saints and there is no need to squelch the believers in such cases. I often make three suggestions for our prayer meetings [1] Don't invite sinners, bring them to

our regular services. [2] If a sinner comes to a prayer meeting stop praying loudly in tongues, and [3] If an "unlearned" Christian (i.e. not familiar with the baptism of the Holy Ghost) attended a prayer meeting either pray in English or very softly in tongues (if we are aware that this is the case). I believe this is consistent with the directives given above.

*1 Cor. 14:27-31 If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; 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. Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.*

Finally, as I've stated, I believe this restriction is given for the corporate meeting only, not prayer meetings or meetings where folks are initially filled with the Holy Ghost. If this is not true, believers speaking in tongues on the day of Pentecost, in Acts 10, and again in Acts 19 where out of order as obviously more than two or three (even if "by course," or one at a time) spoke in tongues that could be heard (Acts 10:46; 19:6-7). Notice that in verse 28 we are told that if there is no interpreter we should remain silent, however, the last clause reveals that this does not imply a complete forbidding of the use of tongues, as we may speak to God. To speak implies audible utterance, therefore, even if there is not interpretation, we may speak, but not to the body and not as to disrupt the service. Many suppose that speaking in tongues is forbidden in the corporate meetings unless interpreted but, in my estimation, this verse proves otherwise.

**Q: "My question is, can a believer who has been baptized in the Holy Ghost, in their own personal prayers to God, speak in tongues when they want to or do they need to wait on an "anointing"? I've been hearing a lot on this subject lately from others and have been getting mixed signals on this. Some of the most anointed, spirit-led preachers I know, who also are used mightily of God in the gifts, practice this ability to pray in tongues as they desire. Some on the other hand are vehemently opposed to the very thought of it, saying that those who do such a thing are trying to manipulate the Holy Ghost."**

This is another good question regarding the gift of tongues. Before I answer this question allow me to make two qualifying points:

First, let me emphasize that we are addressing the third use of tongues cited in my response to the first question above, namely, tongues supernaturally spoken that are for the use of communion, intercession, praise, and worship to God and are not necessarily meant to be understood by men (1 Cor. 14:2). Obviously, the other two applications of the gift of tongues (see points above) would require a spontaneous and Spirit-led inspiration to function in accordance with their original purpose.

Second, allow me to emphatically state: the gift of tongues is supernatural. No man has the ability, in and of himself, to speak a supernatural language that qualifies as Biblical tongues. The Spirit of God must give the utterance or the believer has nothing supernatural to say...

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

Hence, the real question behind the question is this: *“Does the Holy Ghost give the utterance to those who He has filled and who remain filled all the time?”* If we can answer this question with the Scriptures, then we have found the solution to our original inquiry above.

Classical Pentecostals generally tend to take the position that the Holy Ghost-baptized believer can only speak in tongues as the Spirit “moves on him to do so” (exactly what this means we touch on later). Our old-line Pentecostal forefathers were much more cautious than their neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic off-spring, and wisely so. This standard, in my view, was established with a three-fold godly motivation:

1. They feared allowing the sacred to degenerate into something common.
2. They desired to limit spiritual imitations.
3. They dared not foster a careless attitude of, *“as long as I can still speak with other tongues I must be right with God and be filled with the Spirit”*.

Indeed, three very dangerous spiritual pitfalls that accompany the privilege of speaking in other tongues. Therefore, we see, there are good reasons why they viewed their own personal use of tongues in the framework of this restraining spiritual principle. It discouraged excesses, fostered self-examination, and hindered self-willed and fleshly indulgence. No doubt, there is validity to this position and represents truth we dare not ignore in this

hour of wholesale spiritual imitation. Thus, we acknowledge the motivations for such principles are pure, but is the concept itself Scriptural? I don't think it is, for several reasons I cite below.

First, consider the following Scriptural passage:

*“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. Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified. I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: 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 14:14-19*

1. In verse 15, the Apostle Paul frankly declares that he “will pray/sing with the spirit in the same exact language he uses to describe how he will pray/sing with the understanding. Not only does the structure of this verse suggest that the Apostle specifies his will as the determining factor in whether he will pray with the spirit or with the understanding, but the very tone of these inspired words imply the option was open to him, seeing he was Spirit-filled.

2. In verses 16-17, the Apostle cites a situation (perhaps common), namely, praying in tongues (presumably genuinely so) over a meal or while visiting the home of the unlearned. He points out that such “praying”, even though it is good and effectual, cannot edify those who cannot understand it. Now, the point which is crucial to the question at hand is this: if we can only pray in tongues when the Spirit of God specifically prompts us to do so irrespective of our will, why, in this case, would the Spirit of God move on someone to pray (else he could not have done so and done so “well”) only to then discourage such a situation through the Apostle? In other words, would the Holy Ghost move on someone to pray only to correct them for doing so? Again, this seems unlikely. Such an idea renders this passage nonsensical. It must be that Spirit-filled believers can choose, if they are truly filled, to pray in the Spirit even though there are times they should refrain because it is either unwise or disorderly to do so.



Some practical considerations...

1. "Speaking in tongues" is considered the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Pentecostals do not believe a man can be filled with God's Spirit if he does not speak with other tongues. In other words, it is assumed that if the Holy Ghost has baptized the believer then the Spirit is giving the utterance and the believer is to simply yield. Seeing this is true initially, why should it be different as long as the believer remains filled? If a man is indeed filled and remains filled why would the Spirit not be offering the believer supernatural utterance for prayer, communion, worship, resulting in spiritual growth and self-edification (1 Cor 14:4)? Surely, this is one of the purposes of the baptism of the Holy Ghost.

2. Being filled with the Spirit initially requires the believer, by faith, to yield and surrender to the operation of the Spirit and simply "speak". Those who have experienced the baptism of the Holy Ghost know all too well the "warfare" involved in simply stepping out and yielding their tongue to speak. Seeing this is universally true in the initial infilling, why would it be different in the practical, day to day, moment by moment operation of the gift? We must not walk by "feelings", but by faith, we must yield to God's Spirit.

3. Though we should daily judge ourselves according to the Word of God to determine if we are indeed in the faith and filled with the Spirit, the idea that we must wait to "feel" something before we can speak in tongues encourages a walk by sight rather than a walk by faith.

Some final thoughts...

1. The mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost is for all believers (Acts 2:39). We should therefore seek to be filled and stay filled, daily asking and expecting God to fill us with His Spirit afresh (Lk 11:13).

2. Seeing that God commands us both to pray without ceasing and to pray in the Holy Ghost (1 Th 5:17; Jude 1:20) we conclude that God's Spirit will always give the utterance to the believer, if he remains filled with the Spirit, anytime the believer seeks to pray in the spirit.

A final warning...

1. If a man is truly filled with the Spirit, he will speak with other tongues as the Spirit gives the utterance, however, we dare not assume simply because we “can” speak in tongues we are necessarily right with God or filled with the Spirit.

–B.W.

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