

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7444 GRIMSBY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG, N.C. 28075

MARCH 2010

THE PURPOSE OF SPEAKING IN TONGUES

It was in the late 60's and 70's that the contemporary expression of speaking in tongues came into prominence. Since then much debate and argument has raged concerning the phenomenon and it has influenced most protestant denominations as well as Catholics. However it has become accepted and embraced to one extent or another in the denominational world today and the debates and arguments have for the most part ceased. Yet there are many questions concerning the Biblical teaching on the subject that should be answered. Much could be written about the subject, but much can be understood if we ask the question: What is the Scriptural purpose of speaking in tongues? If the Scriptures give an answer to this question then all the confusion and opinions concerning the subject should be put to rest.

There are numerous opinions recorded concerning the purpose of speaking in tongues. A tract on the subject states: "The gift of tongues is an obviously supernatural means of God's communication with His people." Oral Roberts in *The Baptism with the Holy Spirit and the Value of Speaking in Tongues Today* wrote: "The gift of tongues has spoken to God in behalf of other believers, searching out inner weaknesses and needs, and linking them with the will of God and with the mind of the Spirit for them. The gift of interpretation gives God's response to the spirit's intercession." Several years ago Pat Boone's book *A New Song* popularized the belief that speaking in tongues was prayer and thus the term *prayer language* was coined. Leon Morris in *Gifts of the Spirit's Free Bounty* defined the gift of tongues as "an ability to preach the gospel in languages never learned." A popular idea advanced by many is that speaking in tongues is "evidence of the reception of the Holy Spirit." Kittel in *A Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* identified speaking in tongues with "ecstatic speech with the language which is used in heaven between God and the angels and to which men may attain in prayer as they are seized by the Spirit and caught up into heaven." John L. Sherrill in his book *They Speak with Other Tongues* quoted Robert V. Morris as saying: "The gift of tongues turned out to be the gift of praise. As I used the unknown language which God had given me I felt rising in me the love, the awe, the adoration pure and uncontenting (*sic*) that I had not been able to achieve in thought-out prayer."

There are many other Charismatic writers we could quote, saying virtually the same as those quoted above, but one thing that describes them all is that none are Scriptural. Some cite I Cor. 13:1 as Scriptural proof saying that speaking in tongues is "angelic language". But there is no evidence in Scripture that angels use a heavenly language. Whenever angels appear in Scripture, they communicate in normal human language (Judges 6:11, 12; Luke 1:11-20, 26-37).

There is one passage of Scripture that tells us the purpose of speaking in tongues: "In the law it is written, 'By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me' says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers..." (I Cor. 14: 12, 22). This is a quotation from

Isaiah 28:11-12. Note: "*Tongues are a sign to unbelievers*". There are two questions, if answered, will explain this passage. First: Who are the unbelievers, and second: What was the sign to the unbelievers? The New Testament is plain in identifying the unbelievers: "Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a nation producing the fruit of it" (Matt. 21:43). Peter exhorted the people to "Be saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2:40). "And he wondered at their unbelief" (Mark 6:6). "They (the Jews) were broken off for their unbelief...if they do not continue in their unbelief..." (Rom. 11:20, 23). In the book of Acts it was unbelieving Jews who were hostile to the work of the Lord, especially to the missionary work of the Apostle Paul. Of what then was the speaking in tongues a sign to the unbelieving Jews? The context of Isaiah 28 tells what the sign was. "Therefore thus says the Lord God 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed'" (verses 16, 17). The sign was that God had laid the Cornerstone which Israel rejected.

The book of Acts records three accounts of speaking in tongues: Chapters 2:1-13; 10:44-48 and 19:1-7. In each of these accounts we can see how this was a sign to unbelievers. Each account is a record of a new economy in the plan and purpose of God. Pentecost was the inauguration of the new age (Acts 2), the household of Cornelius was bringing the gospel to the Gentiles and shows the normal course of the new age (Acts 10), and the disciples of Ephesus receiving the Spirit was to show the preparatory stage of John the Baptist's ministry was over and had been fulfilled in Christ (Acts 19). The only other New Testament record that deals with tongues is I Corinthians 12:28-31 and chapter 14 where Paul is dealing with the abuse of tongues.

Acts 2: The apostles "were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance" (ver 4). The verses following show that when the multitude, Jews from sixteen different nations, attending the feast of Pentecost, came together were bewildered because they were hearing them speak in their own language in which they were born. The miracle of Pentecost was a message to Israel. It was a sign that the Chief Cornerstone had come and Israel had rejected him. These tongues were known languages seen by the fact that the multitude was able to recognize their native languages or dialects and understand what was being spoken by the apostles. The content of what was spoken was the "wonderful works of God" (2:11). It was not the gospel because Peter later gave that message (2:14-40) and the result was not the conviction of sins (that came later), so speaking in tongues was not a method of preaching the gospel or evangelizing. The "cloven tongues of fire" and the apostles speaking in other tongues was simply a miracle that got the attention of the multitudes, and was evidence of the descent of the Holy Spirit, which Christ had promised and for which the Apostles had waited. The apostles did not pray to receive the Holy Spirit or the gift of tongues. They simply waited for Jesus to do what he had promised he would do. What happened served to confirm the apostle's spiritual authority and the beginning of a new age apart from the Old Testament system. It was a sign of judgment upon unbelieving Israel.

Acts 10: The second record of speaking in tongues begins with the Lord giving Peter a vision in which, after three attempts, convinced him to go to a Gentile in Caesarea who “was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for (Peter) to come to his house and hear a message” from him (ver 22). This violated Peter’s Jewish prejudice because it was “unlawful for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him” but God, by means of the vision (ver 10-16) showed him that he “should not call any man unholy or unclean” (ver 28), that is, the Gentile was accepted by God as well as the Jew, and Peter was commissioned to be the first to bring them the gospel. Peter did not go alone. He took six “of the brethren”, that is Jews, with him (10:23, 11:12). When he returned he was taken to task by the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who took issue with him because he “went to uncircumcised men and ate with them” (11:2, 3). But while Peter “was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell upon all 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” (10:44-46). Then Peter said something he would have never said before this incident: “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did” (ver 47), Thus the speaking in tongues was a sign to the unbelievers (Peter and the Jewish Christians) that the Cornerstone had been laid and “*whosoever*” Gentile as well as Jew would “not be disappointed” (Isa 28:16; Rom.9:33). This incident shows the introductory period of the new age, which did not include Gentiles, was over. Thus the occurrence of speaking in tongues at Caesarea was unique.

Acts 19:1-7: References to the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues in the book of Acts shows the church was in transition. Paul found twelve men from Ephesus who had “not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” When he found they knew only the baptism of John he explained the purpose of John’s baptism was to prepare for the coming of Christ, but they were still looking for the Messiah. The text shows they were not believers, so Paul explained they were to believe on the one coming after John. They were then baptized in the name of Jesus and Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. Kenneth Wuest in *Untranslatable Riches from the Greek New Testament* states concerning this passage: “Since the disciples of John showed ignorance of the coming of the Holy Spirit into the world, an objective sign was necessary to convince them that Paul’s explanation and their new step of faith were correct.” Again speaking in tongues was the sign to twelve unbelievers as well as to all who were still disciples of John and were looking for the Messiah, that he had come and the Cornerstone, of whom John had spoken, was laid.

We have discussed three unusual receptions of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues in Acts. There is a fourth reception recorded in Acts, but nothing is said of speaking in tongues. That is chapter eight when Philip preached the gospel to the Samaritans. Since Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to investigate this happening, and laid hands on the Samaritans and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17), it is possible they spoke in tongues, but Luke does not record this as happening. The gospel introduced on these four occurrences was special cases and the tongues were a sign to unbelievers in each case.

I Corinthians 14: The church in Corinth was “enriched in all speech and knowledge” and were “not lacking in any gift” (chap. 1:5,7), but they were replete with problems concerning their gifts. The problems in the church that Paul dealt with were: divisions (1:11), carnality (3:3), misunderstanding of the ministry (3:5-4:21), gross immorality (5:1), lawsuits between Christians (6:1), moral abuse of believers body (6:15), ignorance of marriage relationships (7:1) and the purpose of virginity (7:25), violations of Christian liberty (8:1), insubordination of women (11:2-6), abuse of the Lord’s supper (11:17), misunderstanding of how body of Christ functions (12), the ignorance of the nature of and use of spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues (12-14) and the denial of the physical resurrection of Christ and the Christian’s physical body (15). It would hardly seem appropriate to take any action of this church as an example of practices in the church today. Edward Schweizer in *The Service of Worship* summarizes the situation in Corinth in these words: “In Corinth a conception of the Spirit of God was predominant which mixed up Holy Spirit and enthusiasm. To the Corinthians, an utterance seemed to be the more godly the more miraculous it appeared. Thus tongues were the highest degree of spiritual maturity, just because it showed it depending on a mysterious power which could not be identified with the natural faculty of man.” Although spiritual gifts are discussed in Romans 12:3-8; and Ephesians 4:7-11, First Corinthians is the only book that mentions the gift of tongues. In these chapters Paul is dealing with the abuse and misuse of the gift of tongues.

The real gift of tongues as revealed in the book of Acts was real languages, not some meaningless, speech. The unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem “were bewildered, because they were each one hearing them speak in his own language” (2:6) There are sixteen different countries whose language was being spoken. The word used in Corinthians for tongues is the same word used in Acts for tongues. It is then reasonable to conclude that in the case of the Corinthians the real gift was languages. Paul insists there be interpretation (I Cor14:13, 27). The word for “interpretation” is the same word as “translation” in John 9:7 and Hebrews 7:2. This was necessary because “Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies that the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying” (14:5).

The King James Version in some places shows the word as “unknown tongue” with “unknown” in italics and other verses simply uses the word “tongue”. The italics showing the word unknown is not in the original language. John MacArthur, Jr. has the following interesting footnote in his book *Charismatic Chaos*: “tongues always appear in the plural form throughout Acts, indicating multiple languages. In I Corinthians 14, however, Paul employed both the singular and plural forms. One possible explanation is that when he used the singular ‘tongue’ in verses 2, 4, 13, 14, and 19, he was referring to the counterfeit pagan babbling that some Corinthian believers were evidently using instead of the true gift of languages. Meaningless, ecstatic speech was fundamentally all the same, so the plural form was unnecessary. When Paul was clearly referring to the authentic gift of languages, however, he used the plural ‘tongues’. If this differentiation between singular ‘tongue’ and the plural ‘tongues’ signifies the difference between a real language and mere gibberish, perhaps the King James translators were correct to supply the term ‘unknown’ after all.”