

Tongues of

FIRE

Explaining the Charismatic Gift

A YRM PUBLICATION



Since the beginning of the New Testament, the gift of tongues has been an intriguing topic for Bible scholars and students alike. Many questions surround this gift, including: What does it mean to speak in tongues? Do the modern examples of “tongues” correspond to what we find in Scripture? How is this gift used? Do we see signs of this gift today?

To answer these questions we will review (1) the modern history of tongues, (2) the Biblical definition of tongues, (3) the gift of tongues, (4) the benefits of tongues, and (5) how this gift was used in the New Testament.

Modern Tongues Movement

According to most Pentecostal references, the modern Pentecostal Movement can be traced back to a Charles Fox Parham. Parham was born on June 4, 1873 in Iowa. Through personal tragedy Parham at the age of seven made a commitment to follow his Heavenly Father.

In 1898 Parham opened his divine healing home in Topeka, Kan., which he named “Bethel.” It was Parham’s goal to provide for those seeking healing and spiritual enlightenment. Later, he was encouraged to open a Bible School. Parham believed that missionaries to other lands should be able to preach in the native tongue or language. To receive additional insight on this subject, he gave a special assignment to his students to determine the Biblical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

According to Pentecostal reports, although the students found that different gifts were given at the outpouring of the Spirit, the gift of speaking in tongues occurred in each. In a prayer service that followed, the first alleged occurrence of “tongues” was reported.

One of Parham’s students, Agnes Ozman, asked that hands be laid upon her to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. At first Parham refused, as he never experienced the gift of tongues himself. Nevertheless, she persisted and Parham agreed. As hands were laid upon Ozman, it is reported that she spoke and wrote in the Chinese



Charles Fox Parham

language. This one episode is regarded by many as the beginning of the modern Pentecostal-Holiness movement.

It is most fascinating that the first alleged modern example of tongues was from a woman who spoke in Chinese, a known language! This is precisely what we find in Scripture. Most examples of tongues that we hear today are utterances of gibberish. This is not what Parham taught nor is it what we find in the first occurrence. Parham believed that it was important to be able to evangelize in the native language and for him, tongues meant speaking in a native language. With this background let us now consider what we find within the Word about speaking in tongues.

First Account in the New Testament

We find the first recorded instance of this gift in the second chapter of Acts: “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 Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4).

There are several points to explore within this account. First, the occasion was the day of Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks. Significantly, the outpouring of Yahweh’s Spirit happened on a Feast day. According to Jewish tradition, it was also on this same Feast day that Yahweh’s Law was given to Israel in the Old Testament, as Scripture also indicates in Exodus 19:1. If true, Yahweh’s law and Holy Spirit were both given on a day that Yahweh marked as holy or sacred.

Second, we find that this gift was through the Holy Spirit and that it was manifested as a rushing wind and fire. So we find that when this gift was given that there were physical signs that were seen and heard by those present.

Third, we find that this gift allowed those in attendance to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. This third point is most important. What does it mean to speak in other tongues?

The word “tongues” comes from the Greek *glossa*, meaning “a language” (specially, one naturally unacquired) (Strong’s Concordance Greek Dictionary). *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon* defines this word as, “The language or dialect used by a particular people distinct from that of other nations.”

A third witness states: “(1) the “tongues... like as of fire” which appeared at Pentecost; (2) “the tongue,” as an organ of speech, e. g., Mark 7:33; Rom 3:13; 14:11; 1 Cor 14:9; Phil 2:11; James 1:26; 3:5, 6, 8; 1 Peter 3:10; 1 John 3:18; Rev 16:10; (3) (a) “a language,” coupled with phule, “a tribe,” laos, “a people,” ethnos, “a nation,” seven times in the Apocalypse, 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15; (b) “the supernatural gift of speaking in another language without its having been learnt” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*).

Based on these references, speaking in other tongues refers to speaking in known languages not naturally acquired and different from one’s own. It should also be noted that the word “other” in verse 4 comes from the Greek *heteros*, which literally means, “another of a different kind” (Companion Bible). So from this instance we find that when the people spoke in different languages, they were all known languages; a point that is paramount. This again is very different from what is considered speaking in tongues or *glossa* today.

As we read on, we continue to see evidence of *glossa* referring to known languages. “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 Elohim. And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this?” (Acts 2:5-12).

In this passage we find that all those gathered heard others speaking in their native tongue or language. There were visitors from 15 nations. After they heard one another speak in different languages, followed by Peter's dynamic sermon (Acts 2:14-36), about 3,000 were pricked in their hearts and gave their lives over to the Messiah through repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38, 41).

If not for the outpouring of the Spirit and the gift of tongues, this great awaking may have never happened. This gift was for a purpose and that purpose was to increase the growth and strength of the assembly.

So from this passage we find what it means to speak in tongues or glossa—speaking in other languages acquired through Yahweh's Spirit and different from your own. As seen, this gift is not gibberish but known languages used in the New Testament to convert nonbelievers.

A Variety of Gifts Given

We find within the Word that speaking in tongues is one gift of many. "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant. You know that you were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as you were led. Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of Elohim calleth Yahshua accursed: and that no man can say that Yahshua is the Master, but by the Holy Spirit. Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Master. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same Elohim which works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues" (1Cor. 12:1-10).

In this account, Paul lists the gifts of Yahweh's Spirit. It is crucial to note that not everyone receives the same gift. Paul says that there are diversities or differences in gifts. We also find that all gifts are from the same Spirit. No matter what gifts we receive, they are all

from the same source, Yahweh's Holy Spirit. Paul also says that there are differences of ministries or administrations. In other words, different gifts serve different purposes or functions.

Paul in verse 7 says that all these gifts are to be used for the profit of all and not just for the profit of one, as is often seen. Notice how some of the gifts are allocated. For example, instead of receiving both the gifts of wisdom and knowledge, a person may receive only the gift of wisdom. Proverbs speaks of wisdom and knowledge separately. We find here the same concept with the gift of tongues. Paul says that there is a gift of tongues and a gift of interpreting tongues. In other words, we find that some may have the ability to speak in other languages, while others may have the ability to interpret what is said.

As we find in this passage, Yahweh's gifts build and benefit one another. This is precisely how the assembly functions. It is not a single person who makes a ministry successful, but the gifts of the collective body working together in harmony.

The Underlying Purpose

From Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians we find that the gift of tongues was used as a tool to evangelize the good news of the Messiah to the unbelieving or unconverted.

“Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that you may prophesy. 2 For he that speaks in an unknown tongue speaks not unto men, but unto Elohim: for no man understands him; howbeit in the spirit he speaks mysteries. 3 But he that prophesies speaks unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. 4 He that speaks in an unknown tongue edifies himself; but he that prophesies edifies the assembly. 5 I would that you all spake with tongues, but rather that you prophesied: for greater is he that prophesies than he that speaks with tongues, except he interpret, that the assembly may receive edifying” (1Cor. 14:1-5).

In verse 2, Paul explains that when we speak in unknown tongues that we do not speak to man, but in mysteries. What exactly does he mean? As we learned, the word “tongues” comes from the Greek word *glossa* meaning languages.

This passage confirms that when we speak in a tongue or language

that is unknown the words cannot be understood and are therefore considered a mystery. An example would be if we traveled to Kenya and heard a man preaching in Swahili. For the average American his language would be a mystery or unknown. This is why Paul says he who speaks in tongues edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the assembly.

Now what does it mean to prophesy? The word “prophesies” comes from the Greek *propheteuo*, meaning “...to foretell events, speak under inspiration, or to exercise the prophetic office” (Strong’s Concordance). In this passage Paul was likely referring to teaching under the inspiration of Yahweh’s Holy Spirit. Prophecy or teaching is what is most valuable to the assembly. This is the reason Paul said that he would rather prophesy than to speak in tongues. A tongue or language serves no value if those who hear are unfamiliar with that glossa or language, unless one can interpret (v.5).

A Great Way to Teach

To understand the purpose of this gift, let us continue reading: “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? 7 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? 8 For if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? 9 So likewise you, except you utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for you shall speak into the air. 10 There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. 11 Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaks a barbarian, and he that speaks shall be a barbarian unto me. 12 Even so you, forasmuch as you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that you may excel to the edifying of the church. 13 Wherefore let him that speaks in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret. 14 For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. 15 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” (1Cor. 14:6-15).

In verse 6 we find again that speaking in a tongue is of no profit unless we speak to convey a teaching or doctrine. The word doctrine is derived from the Greek word *didache*, meaning “instruction.” This is again one of those gifts that most benefit the assembly. When we teach Yahweh’s Word we come to a deeper knowledge of Him and through that instruction we become better disciples. Speaking in a language that is unknown, or worse yet, uttering sounds without meaning or purpose, does not edify.

Paul here uses the analogy of musical instruments and states that unless the instrument makes an identifiable sound it serves no value. In the Old Testament the trumpet was often the main method of communication for Israel, including the calling to war (Num. 10:9). If the sound of the trumpet were incorrect, confusion would have erupted. This same concept holds true when we speak in tongues or languages that are unknown to our audience.

Paul in verse 10 said that there were many kinds of languages and that none were without significance. The word “significance,” is from the Greek word *aphonos*, meaning to be “voiceless, i.e. mute or without meaning.” This Greek word confirms that Paul was not referring to meaningless babble, but to recognized languages. Even the angels themselves possess a tongue or known language (1Cor. 13:1), likely the Hebrew language (Acts 26:14).

Paul goes on here to say that if the tongue or language is unknown, “he that speaks shall be a barbarian. . . .” In Greek the word “barbarian” literally means, “a foreigner.” Therefore, those who speak in different or unknown languages are as a foreigner or alien. Unless the language is understood it is of no benefit. It is for this reason that Paul states in verse 16, “Else when you shall bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupies the room of the unlearned say Amen at your giving of thanks, seeing he understands not what you say?” In this passage Paul reiterates that if we speak in a tongue or language given by the Holy Spirit that is unknown to the audience that it is unfruitful to our natural mind.

In verse 22 we find a truth that many overlook. “Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that

believe not: but prophesying serves not for them that believe not, but for them which believe” (1Cor. 14:22).

A Different Gift for Believers

Paul verifies that the gift of tongues is not a sign to believers, but to those who disbelieve. With this in mind it seems odd that many assemblies would base their main source of validation on a sign specifically meant for unbelievers.

However, this is precisely what we find with many charismatic assemblies today. Some believe that a person is never completely converted unless he or she speaks in tongues. This is not only unfounded scripturally, but contradicts the purpose of this gift.

If the gift of tongues is for the unbeliever, what then is for the believer? Prophecy or inspired teaching is for the believer. It provides the knowledge and instruction allowing us to become better disciples of our Father in heaven and Savior.

In verse 23 Paul asks, “If therefore the whole assembly 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 you are mad?”

The word “mad” comes from the Greek word *mainomai*, meaning “one who so speaks that he seems not to be in his right mind” (*Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*). This would be no different from visiting an assembly with members speaking Spanish, German, and Chinese simultaneously. They would be viewed as mad or senseless. This is why prophecy or inspired teaching is preferred or greater than tongues. As Paul states in verse 24, “But if all prophesy [teach by inspiration], and there come in one that believes not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all....” He confirms here that if we prophesy or teach, all are profited, even the new visitor, that might be new.

Examples of Tongues

Let’s now consider some of the instances of tongues we find in the Word. One of the first passages where we find this gift being used is Acts 10:44-48, “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Spirit 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 Spirit. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify Elohim. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Master [Yahshua]. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.” When the gentiles heard the Word they received the Holy Spirit. Immediately they spoke in tongues or languages and magnified Yahweh. When it was evident that the gentiles had received the Spirit, they were then baptized into the Name of Yahshua the Messiah. Interestingly, in this example we find that the gentiles received the Spirit prior to baptism. Receiving the Spirit prior to baptism was not uncommon. In almost all other instances, the reverse occurred.

The gift of tongues here served a two-fold purpose. It was a sign of conversion to those who were filled with the Spirit and a confirmation to those circumcised Jews that witnessed this miraculous event. The gift of tongues was a sign to show that Yahweh was calling out the gentiles who prior to it were considered unbelievers or barbarians.

A second example of this gift is in Acts 19:1-8, “And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, he said unto them, Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Spirit. And he said unto them, Unto what then were you baptized? And they said, Unto John’s baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Messiah Yahshua. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Master Yahshua. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. And all the men were about twelve. And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of Yahweh.”

This account speaks of two baptisms, a baptism of repentance

and a baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is the only instance of this difference. While John's baptism offered opportunity for repentance, it did not offer the remission from sins and receiving of the Holy Spirit, as with Yahshua's baptism.

In addition, a connection is also found between the receiving of the Holy Spirit and the gift of tongues. Immediately upon baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit, we find that these twelve new converts spoke in tongues or languages as a sign or validation of their conversion. As with all of Yahweh's gifts, glossa served an important purpose. It was partly owing to this gift that 3,000 were converted at Pentecost and many other examples found in Acts.

As we have seen, Scripture does not corroborate the common understanding of tongues. This gift was not meaningless babble, but an effective tool that served a multifaceted purpose. It is a demonstration of Yahweh's great power and confirmation of one's conversion.

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