
Chapter 12.3
The Biblical Gift of Tongues Was
Miraculous & Meaningful
Not Meaningless

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Primary Points

- Because the biblical gift of tongues enabled someone to speak in a foreign human language they did not know, it was a miracle of God.
- The biblical gift of tongues amazed people, convincing them that God was changing His covenant with humanity. The modern version doesn't amaze anyone. This is one more example of *charismaticism's* habit of diluting the miraculous nature of the biblical gifts in order to conform them to their modern experience, all because they cannot match the biblical gifts.
- We would suggest that the gift of tongues always accompanied new divine revelation and/or revolutionary changes in divine modes of operation, including the Gospel's expanding scope to the Gentiles.
- It is significant that the first occurrence of this gift in the early Church involved specifically "**God-fearing Jews from every nation.**"
- "Tongues served well to show that God was moving from the single nation of Israel to all the nations."
- Notice that the Apostle Paul's clearest and most definitive statement concerning the gift of tongues is that it is "**a [miraculous] sign . . . for unbelievers**" (1 Cor 14:22).
- It is both ironic and sad that a spiritual gift with the divine purpose of bringing God's people together (i.e. Jews and Gentiles), has been perverted into a pagan form that has split many Christians and churches.
- The gift of tongues contained meaningful speech and the Apostle Paul expected meaningful content, which is why he demanded interpretation.
- However, for several reasons, tongues was not a significant source of divine revelation.
- We have no record in the NT of anyone miraculously speaking in a foreign language, at length, in order to communicate and explain the Gospel.

A) Tongues Was a Miracle

Because the biblical gift of tongues enabled someone to speak in a foreign human language they did not know, it was a miracle of God. In Acts 2 we read that the “**Spirit** [miraculously] **enabled**” the Apostles “**to speak in other tongues**” (v. 4), and if it was not miraculous, why would the Spirit be needed? Because the gift was an easily recognized miracle, Luke records that, “**a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language**” and they were “**utterly amazed**” (v. 6).

Likewise in Acts 10, after the Apostle Peter had preached the Gospel to the first Gentile converts, we read:

The circumcised believers [Jews] **who had come with Peter were astonished** that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues [*glossais*: “real though human foreign languages”]. (vs. 45-6)

The Jewish Christians who accompanied the Apostle would not have been “**astonished**” with mere gibberish, but by a miracle of real human language.

We see the same in Acts 11. Here Peter is trying to prove to suspicious Jews that non-Jews can be saved too. As his only defense, the Apostle reports, “**As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as He had come on us at the beginning**” (v. 15). How did he know this, and why would it impress his critics? It was because “**the Holy Spirit came on**” those Gentiles in an obviously miraculous way, evidenced by their ability to speak in real foreign human languages they did not know, just as the Apostles had at Pentecost. There is no other answer.

Perhaps these new converts spoke in Hebrew or Aramaic which the Apostle and the Jews accompanying him would recognize, while it would be unlikely that such Gentiles would know. Regardless, mere gibberish or a “prayer language” would not have convinced anyone of anything. As a result of the powerful miracle enabled by the gift of tongues, the Apostle’s critics “**had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life’**” (v. 18).

Whatever the modern version of tongues is, it does not have this authenticating miraculous effect. This is perhaps the clearest difference between the effect of the biblical tongues phenomena and the modern one. The latter doesn’t amaze anyone. This is because it is not a miracle, like the biblical gift of tongues was. Speaking in an unlearned foreign human language would be

recognized as such a miracle. On the other hand, the modern redefinition of the gift as primarily a “private prayer language” is no miracle at all. This is simply one more example of *charismaticism’s* ¹habit of diluting the miraculous nature of the biblical gifts in order to conform them to their modern experience, all because they cannot match the biblical gifts.

B) Tongues was a Miraculous Sign Especially to Jews to Authenticate New Divine Revelation

B.1) Biblical evidence

The miracle gift of tongues was a *sign gift*, and like the others, it occurred in order to supernaturally authenticate new divine revelation. ² Accordingly, in Mark 16 we read: **“these signs [sēmeia] will accompany those who believe: In My name they will drive out demons; they will [miraculously] speak in new tongues [glossais]”** (Mark 16:17). These **“signs”** were no doubt understood to be for the purpose of divinely authenticating **“those who believe”** and were spreading the Gospel. ³

We would suggest that the gift of tongues always accompanied new divine revelation and/or revolutionary changes in divine modes of operation, obviously including the Gospel’s message, but also the Gospel’s expanding scope to the Gentiles. Accordingly, shortly after its first occurrence, the Apostle proclaims new divine revelation to the Jews present, if not the whole Jewish nation, when he says, **“let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, Whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ”** (v. 36). He commanded them to **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”** and he promised them, **“you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”** (v. 38). The Apostle’s whole message contained previously unrevealed divine truth that needed to be miraculously authenticated to these Jews, and thus God provided the miraculous sign of giving the Apostles the ability to speak in real foreign human languages they did not know.

It is significant that the first occurrence of this gift in the early Church involved specifically **“God-fearing Jews from every nation”** (2:5). In its first occurrence it obviously has a special relationship and purpose with the Jews. Accordingly, this purpose of authenticating new divine revelation or revolutionary divine operation to the Jews is reflected in the other occurrences of the miraculous *sign gift* of tongues recorded in Acts.

In Acts 10, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is being officially introduced for the first time to the Gentiles by the Apostle Peter. Luke records:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ **The circumcised believers [Jews] who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.** ⁴⁶ **For they heard them speaking in tongues [glossais: "real foreign human languages] and [coherently and miraculously] praising God.**

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ **"Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have [and are saved!]."** ⁴⁸ **So he ordered that they [the non-Jews] be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ [and for the first time ever, be included with the Jews as the chosen people of God].** (Acts 10:44-48)

The gift of miraculously speaking in real foreign human languages was granted as a miraculous sign especially for the **"circumcised [Jewish] believers who had come with Peter"** (10:45). This was indeed a unique and monumental event that warranted such a supernatural occurrence. God was revealing that salvation was not only for the Jews but for the Gentiles as well and He was confirming such a revolutionary truth with this occurrence of miraculously speaking in real human foreign languages.

The importance of the gift of tongues in confirming new revelation to the Jews is especially evident in the Apostle's defense regarding the authenticity of the Gentile conversions in Acts 11. Luke records:

The Apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² **So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him** ³ **and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened**

"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as He had come on us at the beginning [at Pentecost]. . . . ¹⁷ **So if God gave them the same gift as He gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." (Acts 11:1-4, 15-18)**

Some Christian Jews were openly and remarkably critical of any non-Jews being eligible for the salvation offered in the New Covenant (v. 2). What ultimately convinced these Jews of this unprecedented event is the miracles that surrounded it, including these Gentiles miraculously speaking in real human foreign languages just as the Apostles had at Pentecost (cf. v. 15). This miraculous sign was no doubt necessary to prove to the Apostle's peers (and the Apostle himself) that the Gentiles had indeed been included into the people of God (cf. v. 18).

Accordingly, O. Palmer Robertson comments in the *Westminster Theological Journal*: "Tongues served well to show that God was moving from the single nation of Israel to all the nations."⁴ John MacArthur agrees:

Tongues were intended as a sign to unbelieving Israel. They signified that God had begun a new work that encompassed the Gentiles. The Lord would now speak to all nations in all languages. The barriers were down. And so the gift of languages symbolized not only the curse of God on a disobedient nation, but also the blessing of God on the whole world. Tongues were therefore a [miraculous] sign of transition between the Old and New Covenants.⁵

In Acts 19, it would seem we have another instance of tongues occurring in the context of God confirming new divine truth in the presence of Jewish unbelievers. Some argue that the followers of John the Baptist encountered here by the Apostle Paul on his arrival to Ephesus were already Christians because they are referred to as "**disciples**" (19:1). However, NT scholar I. Howard Marshall states the obvious:

These men can hardly have been Christians since they had not received the gift of the Spirit. It is safe to say that the New Testament does not recognize the possibility of being a Christian apart from possession of the Spirit (Jn. 3:5; Acts 11:17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Gal. 3:2; 1 Thes. 1:5f; Tit. 3:5; Heb. 6:4; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 Jn. 3:24; 4:13).⁶

It can be further suggested that they were Jews, as descriptions of John the Baptist's ministry clearly depict it as something essentially Jewish.⁷ But even if these "**disciples**" themselves were not Jewish, it is clear that this episode was another important event that needed authentication for Jews in general. It was important for Jews to understand that being a follower of John the Baptist was no longer sufficient, and that the One Who was to baptize them with the Holy Spirit and really save them had come (cf. John 1:29-34). This was again a revolutionary truth to many Jews and the

miraculous occurrence of speaking in real foreign human languages provided the necessary proof that God was changing the means of His relationship with them.

Accordingly, a point of clarification may be needed here in defining exactly what kind of new divine revelation was authenticated by the gift of tongues. More accurately, as we have said above, it authenticated unprecedented revelation *and/or* revolutionary changes in divine modes of operation, obviously including the Gospel's message, but also the Gospel's expanding scope to the Gentiles. Accordingly, Grant Osborne, Professor of New Testament at Trinity, writes the gift of tongues, "authenticated the addition of new groups to the church,"⁸ and subsequently to salvation under the New Covenant, something especially important for the Jews.

Contrary to what *glossaism* claims, the Apostle describes the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 precisely as it operated in Acts: a sign to Jewish unbelievers. *In the most definitive statement on the nature and purpose of biblical tongues in Scripture*, the Apostle writes:

In the [Jewish] Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak [in foreign human languages] to this people [the Jews], but even then they [the Jews] will not listen to Me," says the Lord. Tongues, then, are a [miraculous] sign [simeion], not for believers but for [Jewish] unbelievers. . . . So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some [Corinthian-Greek] unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (14:21-23)

Notice that the Apostle Paul's clearest and most definitive statement concerning the gift of tongues is that it is "**a [miraculous] sign . . . for unbelievers**" (v. 22).⁹ If we take the NT's use of the word "**sign**" into consideration, the most likely reference here is to the authenticating "**miraculous signs and wonders**" that "**the Apostles performed**" (Acts 5:12), with speaking in tongues being one of them (cf. Mark 16:17, 20; John 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:48; 6:2, 26; 7:31; 9:16; 11:47; 12:37; 20:30; Acts 2:22, 43; 4:30; 6:8; 7:36; 8:6, 13; 14:3; 15:12; Rom 15:19; 1 Cor 1:22; Heb 2:4). In fact, the Apostle had told the Corinthians earlier in the letter that "**Jews demand miraculous signs [simeia]**" (1:22) in order to be persuaded of spiritual truths. The gift of tongues was one of the "**miraculous signs**" that God provided, and this would seem the

clearest understanding of the Apostle's statement, "**Tongues . . . are a [miraculous] sign . . . for unbelievers.**"

The Apostle's clear statement clearly contradicts the *glossaist* Dr. Turner who claims, "Paul does not explicitly say why God has given the gift of tongues."¹⁰ On the contrary, we claimed in the first chapter that the Bible's teaching on the gift of tongues was sufficiently clear to refute the views of *glossaism* and the Apostle's statement here is both exceptionally clear and devastating for the modern tongues movement. There certainly is no doubt that at least the Apostle *intended* to "explicitly say why God has given the gift of tongues," and if we do not recognize that or properly interpret him, it is not the Apostle's fault.¹¹

Accordingly, we would ask, when is the gift of tongues ever used today as "**a [miraculous] sign . . . for unbelievers**" in modern *glossaism*? Let us think particularly about the popular notion that the gift of tongues is to be a private prayer language. That is simply incompatible with the Apostle Paul's definitive statement that, "**Tongues . . . are a [miraculous] sign . . . for unbelievers.**" First, the Apostle is clearly implying it is a *miraculous* sign, and modern "tongues prayer" in particular is not even claimed to be a miracle. Secondly, the Apostle says the gift of tongues was intended to communicate something to *unbelievers*, which is also squarely at odds with how both the private and public versions of tongues are used today in *glossaism*.

The typical response by *glossaist* teachers to the Apostle's statement is to conveniently assume that by the gift of "**tongues**" he only has in mind the kind of obscure utterances that occur today, instead of the miracle of speaking coherently in a foreign human language as it is described in Acts. Then it is claimed that such gibberish would somehow be a sign communicating divine judgment to unbelievers.¹² For example, Dr. Fee comments on 1 Corinthians 14:22:

[I]n the public gathering uninterpreted tongues function as a sign for unbelievers. . . . Because tongues are unintelligible [were they in Acts 2?], unbelievers receive no revelation from God [they did in Acts 2]; they cannot thereby be brought to faith [they were in Acts 2]. Thus by their response of seeing the work of the Spirit as madness, they are destined for divine judgment.¹³

Likewise, Dr. Grudem remarks concerning Paul's statement that "**tongues . . . are a sign . . . for unbelievers**":

Here Paul uses the word "sign" to mean "*sign of God's attitude*" (whether positive or negative). Tongues that are not

understood by outsiders are certainly a *negative* sign—as sign of judgment.¹⁴

First, it must be asked, how could “uninterpreted,” “unintelligible,” and non-revelational speech be a sign to anyone of anything and deserving divine judgment? Only the biblical version of tongues as described in Acts would operate as a sign, not the modern version. If it was a sign of judgment to unbelievers, it certainly didn’t work in the Corinthian assembly this way because the Apostle anticipates they will mock those speaking in tongues telling them, “**you are out of your mind**” (v. 23). So much for the feeling of being divinely judged.

In fact, it is not only unbelievers who would be perfectly right to tell a group of gibberish speaking people, “**you are out of your mind**,” (v. 23), but believers would be perfectly right to do the same. No one, believer or unbeliever would ever be expected or obligated to believe that such gibberish was divine, and this is precisely the point the Apostle is making.

Secondly, what *glossaist* are essentially claiming is that the gift of tongues has the same effect on an unbeliever as “**prophesying**” by which:

he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!” (1 Cor 14:24)

However, the Apostle teaches just the opposite, that the gift of *prophecy* will work as a sign of divine judgment, not tongues as *glossaist* claim.

Accordingly, Dr. Turner admits concerning the Apostle statement that “**tongues . . . are a sign . . . for unbelievers**”:

This would almost [why almost?] make sense as a straightforward statement if Paul had Lucan Pentecostal xenolalia [supernaturally speaking multiple human languages] as his model. We would then approach the claim that Paul thought of xenolalia as a convincing sign-gift.¹⁵

Unfortunately, Dr. Turner goes on to deny this and apparently, with many others, ignores what seems obvious in order to avoid the devastating consequences that taking the Apostle at face value would have on modern *glossaism*.

At this point, it must be asked that if the biblical gift of “**tongues . . . are a sign . . . for unbelievers**” (1 Cor 14:22), as it was in Acts, why did the Apostle say:

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some [Corinthian-Greek] unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? (1 Cor 14:23)

The reason is obviously because the demographic setting in the Corinthian church would have been completely different from that at Pentecost. The latter was a very unique situation making the gift of tongues particularly effective. Luke says that because of the Feast of Pentecost, there were "**Jews from every nation**" in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5).

Accordingly, because the real gift of tongues was the miraculous ability to speak in multiple foreign human languages it was effective in the hearing of people, "**from every nation.**" However, in Corinth, most people would have almost exclusively spoken only Greek, instead of a myriad of foreign languages, and the ability to miraculously speak in a foreign language would be ineffective. Even if one did speak in a foreign language that these Greeks had never heard, it would sound weird.

One is reminded again of what happened at Pentecost. While the "**Jews from every nation**" (Acts 2:5) said, "**we hear them [miraculously] declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!** [*glossais*: "real human languages"] . . . "**Some . . . made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."**" (2:11, 13).

The obvious reason that some recognized the miracle of tongues and others thought it was gibberish was that the latter didn't know the foreign languages being spoken, and perhaps only spoke Aramaic or Hebrew. This is precisely why the rather exclusively Greek Corinthian unbelievers would have thought the tongues speaking was gibberish as well, they would not know foreign language being miraculously spoken.

The other reason that the real gift of tongues would not be effective in Corinth was because it was especially intended to be a miraculous sign to unbelieving Jews. Accordingly, the Apostle's immediate quote concerning "**strange tongues**" (v. 21) is taken from something originally written to Jews and recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Apostle is quoting from Isaiah 28:11-12 where God is warning *unbelieving Jews* of the coming Assyrian army who would speak to them in a foreign language. In fact, in the Isaiah passage, the occurrence of the Jews being communicated to in foreign languages would be a miraculous fulfillment of a prophecy, and an authenticating sign that God was indeed speaking to them.

In addition, the Apostle had already reminded the Corinthians *in this very letter* that, “**Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks** [like most of the Corinthians] **look for wisdom**” (cf. 1:22). Likewise, the obviously Jewish author of Hebrews noted the significance of authenticating miraculous signs for the Jews when he wrote of the revolutionary New Covenant revelation:

This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us [Jews] by those who heard Him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit [no doubt including the gift of tongues] distributed according to His will (Heb 2:3-4)

It would seem then that the Apostle is reminding the primarily Greek Corinthians that the purpose of the gift of tongues is primarily “**a sign . . . for [Jewish] unbelievers**, not even Greek unbelievers.”¹⁶ While the biblical gift of tongues as it clearly operated in Acts did act as the “**miraculous signs**” that the Apostle says the “**Jews demand**” (1 Cor 1:22), the modern version of the gift is not a miraculous sign of anything.

All of this explains why the Apostle says that “**some who do not understand** [*ideōtai*¹⁷]” will not be effected by the gift of tongues. Paul does not specify what they don’t understand, but we have pointed out at least two obvious issues. If a person did “**not understand**” the foreign human language being miraculously spoken through the gift, or was a Greek who did “**not understand**” the especially Jewish significance of the gift, then indeed it would have no effect. Such a reminder would serve the Apostle’s purposes here, which is to help the “tongues hungry” Corinthians put even the real gift into proper perspective. In a primarily Gentile context, the real gift of tongues would be unexpected and misunderstood.¹⁸

B.2) Historical evidence

Not surprisingly, the view that the gift of tongues operated as a miraculous sign to authenticate new divine revelation and/or divine operation, has been the historical view of the Church. Accordingly, the great Augustine wrote concerning the gift:

In the earliest time, “the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed; and they spoke with tongues,” which they had not learned, “as the Spirit gave them utterance.” These were the Sign adapted to the time [of new divine revelation]. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues,

to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away.¹⁹

We suggest it passed away because the New Testament revelation no longer needed to be miraculously authenticated.

Likewise, Augustine's counterpart in the East, Chrysostom (347-407), commenting on Paul's statement that "**Tongues . . . are a sign . . . for unbelievers**" wrote something that outright denies the claims of modern *glossaism*:

[N]or is [speaking in a] tongue any way useful to believers; for its only work is to astonish [unbelievers]. . . [thus] the word "sign"²⁰

More recent authors have reflected the biblical evidence above that it was a miraculous *sign gift* particularly for the Jews. Zane Hodges, Professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary comments:

Tongues were given as a sign to the Jewish people only, from which it follows that the average heathen visitor to the [Corinthian] Christian assembly (far more likely to be a Gentile than a hostile Jew) would be exposed to a phenomenon never intended for him in the first place.²¹

Likewise, Merrill F. Unger (1909-1980), the well known and respected author of *Unger's Bible Dictionary* writes:

The supernatural phenomenon [of the gift of tongues] was a tangible demonstration to them that some aspect of the new age of grace was being graphically impressed upon them. The Apostle Paul himself declared, "The Jews require a sign" (1 Cor. 1:22). And little wonder in the instance of the change-over from the legal or Mosaic age to the new age of grace!

The transition from a long era of almost fifteen centuries in which they had endured the rigorous disciplines of dispensational childhood to bring them to Christ that they might be saved by faith (Gal. 3:23-29) was so earth-shattering in their case that they required full proof that it was really God's doing. God, knowing their predicament, graciously gave the Jews an unmistakable sign.²²

As well, the Roman Catholic scholar of early Christianity, Luke Timothy Johnson, Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Emory University, writes:

As a result [of the gift of tongues], this [Christian] sect [of Judaism] had a legitimate if not compelling claim to be

considered as the authentic people of God, the rightful heir of the biblical tradition. In short, by enlivening their hearts and by liberating their tongues, this gift of the Holy Spirit made clear to all that prophecy was alive and that Jesus was alive as well.²³

So it would seem clear from both Acts and 1 Corinthians that the biblical gift of tongues was intended to be a miraculous *sign gift* especially to Jews, to authenticate the New Covenant revelation coming through the *Scripture gifts* of the NT Apostles and Prophets. This again would argue against its use as a private prayer language.

In addition, it is both ironic and sad that a spiritual gift with the divine purpose of bringing God's people together (i.e. Jews and Gentiles), has been perverted into a pagan form that has split many Christians and churches.

C) Tongues Produced Meaningful, Although Not Significant, Speech

C.1) Only enough speech to demonstrate a miracle was sufficient

In Acts 2 some of those hearing the disciples speak in tongues heard them "**declaring the wonders of God in [their] own tongues**" (v. 11). Therefore, it is clear that what the Apostles spoke with their gift of tongues contained meaningful speech. In Acts 10, Peter and his companions heard the new Gentile believers "**speaking with tongues and exalting God**" (v. 46), obviously meaning that the tongues speech contained meaningful content.

In the third and final occurrence of miraculously speaking in foreign languages recorded by Luke we find the same thing. He records that in the presence of Paul, some Ephesian converts "**began speaking with tongues and prophesied**" (Acts 19:6). Again, it would have been impossible for those listening to know that the tongues speakers were prophesying unless their speech was understood to have meaningful content.²⁴

The Apostle Paul also expected an authentic utterance through the gift of tongues to contain meaningful content. This is obviously one reason that he demanded that such an utterance be translated, and if it was, he expected it to contain edifying content (cf. 1 Cor 14:5). Secondly, the Apostle states in 14:10: "**Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning.**" What else could this be, but a reminder to the

Corinthians that anything legitimately spoken by a human contains some meaningful content?

Also, the Apostle teaches throughout 1 Corinthians 12-14 that one of the ways to tell the difference between the real gift and a fake gift of tongues is in the *content* of what is being communicated through the utterance. Which was another reason he demanded such an utterance to be translated in order to ensure it contained Christian content. As will be demonstrated in a subsequent chapter, one of the Apostle's desires in this epistle is to help the Corinthians distinguish authentic manifestations of the spiritual gifts from counterfeit ones.

Accordingly, the Apostle expected meaningful human speech to be a part of the exercise of any speaking spiritual gift, tongues included. This was because all spiritual gifts are intended to edify people, and understanding and meaning are essential to any human spiritual edification.

Of course, this too is denied by *glossaism*, which claims that spiritual edification can occur even if there is no meaningful content to a tongues utterance. In fact, the Apostle Paul denies this can be the case for others throughout 1 Corinthians 14. As discussed further elsewhere, our mind and reason play a critical God-ordained part in God pleasing *whole-hearted worship* and real spiritual edification.²⁵

Although it is clear that the Apostle expected an authentic Christian tongues utterance to contain something meaningful that could be translated, evaluated, and edifying, we might ask whether he expected tongues to be a significant source of divine revelation. The answer would seem to be "no" for the following reasons.

First of all, he states in this very chapter that, "**tongues are for a [miraculous] sign [not revelation] . . . to unbelievers . . . prophecy, however, is for believers [and divine revelation]**" (1 Cor 14:22). Throughout the whole chapter the Apostle makes it clear that the gift of prophecy is superior to tongues and one of the reasons would seem to be that it is a much better source of divine revelation.

Secondly, the only tongues utterances we have quoted in Scripture are relatively short and ambiguously described as "**the wonders of God**" (Acts 2:11), "**praising God**" (Acts 10:46), and "**prophesying**" (Acts 19:6), and rather impossible to evaluate for new divine revelation.

Thirdly, the Apostle's insistence that tongues utterances be interpreted may not so much be for the sake of their *contents*, as much as a necessary step in revealing an authentic Christian tongues utterance as a *miracle* of speaking something with meaning in a foreign language that the speaker does not know. In other

words, the content of an authentic tongues utterance only needed enough meaningful speech to demonstrate a miracle, not necessarily provide an abundance of new divine revelation.

Still, some may be confused by the Apostle's statement that:

But now, brethren, [even] if I come to you speaking in tongues, what shall I profit you, unless I [also] speak to you either by way of revelation or [the gift] of [divine] knowledge or [the gift] of prophecy or [the gift] of teaching? (1 Cor 14:6)

The suggested additions to the verse are provided in an attempt to offer clarification. It would seem obvious that the Apostle is not implying that the "**revelation . . . or [divine] knowledge or . . . prophecy or . . . teaching**" would come in the form of tongues, but rather that the person would also exercise other gifts so that the congregation would be edified by them. At least three of these forms of instruction are gifts themselves that have been explicitly mentioned in this very section, and all of which are superior to tongues, and would be hindered by the use of tongues.

What the Apostle is saying is that even if he came and spoke through the gift of tongues, it would be far better if instead, he exercised the other spiritual gifts he lists to ensure that there would be edifying revelation.

Accordingly, tongues is clearly distinguished from gifts of revelation when the Apostle writes, "**When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation**" (v. 26). Therefore, "**a tongue**" is distinguished from "**a revelation**," partly because even the authentic gift is an authenticating *sign gift*, not a revelatory *Scripture gift* like prophecy.

C.2) Not intended to communicate the Gospel

Along the same lines, some believe that the gift of tongues was used in the early Church to communicate the Gospel to unbelievers. This is understandable in light of the fact that the Gospel bore "**fruit**" "**all over the world**" (Col 1:6). In addition, Paul, the missionary extraordinaire, had told the Corinthians, "**I speak in tongues more than all of you**" (1 Cor 14:18). A statement that some interpret as saying that he used it in communicating the Gospel in the foreign lands he visited, so that he would not have to naturally learn their native languages. Those who argue this view claim that this is one reason that the gift of tongues needs to operate today.

There are obvious problems with this view, however. First of all, proponents of it are in the difficult situation of arguing from biblical silence, not evidence, as we have no record in the NT of anyone miraculously speaking in a foreign language, at length, in order to communicate and explain the Gospel. As noted above, the content of the authentic tongues utterances are ambiguously described as “**the wonders of God**” (Acts 2:11), “**praising God**” (Acts 10:46), and “**prophesying**” (Acts 19:6). There is no proof here that the utterances contained the Gospel, or any other significant revelation. Most expositors agree also that the Apostle Peter did not preach the Gospel simultaneously in several foreign languages at Pentecost, but rather spoke in Aramaic or Hebrew, all of which the visitors to Jerusalem would have probably understood.

As far as the Apostle Paul is concerned, there is no indication in the Gospel presentations recorded that he did it with the gift of tongues. It is to be remembered that Greek was the universal language of virtually the entire known world. Wherever it wasn't, the Gospel could be translated just as it is today. Which is why, for example, early Church history records that John Mark was the Apostle Peter's interpreter, and which probably explains why the Apostle Paul said he considered him so “**helpful to me in my ministry**” (2 Tim. 4:11).²⁶ Even the Apostles apparently needed interpreters and translators.

Also, as the Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians, the *sign gift* of tongues was really for 1st century Jews, not 20th century Africans or South Americans. And even so, we have numerous instances recorded in Acts when the gift *was* operating in the early Church, where the Gospel is preached in even Jewish synagogues, and the tongues phenomenon *does not* occur. If it had, it is best to assume it would have been recorded. All in all, there is no reason to assume that the gift worked then, or needs to work today, to communicate the Gospel.

Extras & Endnotes

Devotion to Dad

Father, we rejoice that You have expanded Your covenant to all nations, and we are thankful that you miraculously authenticated this monumental change, not only by changed lives, but the miracle

of tongues. Help us preserve this gift as a miracle of the early Church to authenticate this monumental event, and we regret it has been diluted to some kind of prayer language.

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) What biblical evidence do we have that the gift of tongues was a miracle of God?
- 2) What do we claim was God's purpose for the gift of tongues? What biblical evidence do we provide for this? Do you agree or disagree and why?
- 3) What do we claim is the most clear and definitive biblical statement on the purpose of the gift of tongues? Do you agree or disagree? How does this impact the claims of *glossaists*?
- 4) What biblical evidence do we provide to claim that the gift of tongues contained meaningful speech? How does this affect the claims of *glossaists*?
- 5) Why do we claim that the gift of tongues was not a significant source of divine revelation?
- 6) Why do we suggest that the gift of tongues was not used to communicate the Gospel in foreign lands? Do you agree? Would we expect it to be given for this purpose today?

Publications & Particulars

¹ For a definition of *charismaticism* see endnote in chapter 12.1.

² For further discussion of the nature of *sign gifts* see section 10.5.A.3.

³ Mark 16:17-18 supports the fact that tongues were a part of the early Church's experience, but it says nothing about the abundance or duration of the phenomenon. Any argument from this text must also take into consideration that most conservative NT scholars do not consider these verses to be Scripture. Finally, if *glossaists* wish to use this passage to support their claim that speaking in tongues and healing is to be the common practice among Christians today, then what of the ability to handle poisonous snakes and to drink poison without harm? Why aren't they practicing these "poison" gifts today just as ardently as the others? For further discussion of Mark 16:17-18 see section 11.3.C.

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- ⁴ O. Palmer Robertson, "Tongues: Sign of Covenantal Curse and Blessing," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (Fall 1975-Spring 1976), 53.
- ⁵ John MacArthur, *MacArthur's New Testament Commentary*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Parsons Technology, 1997), *in loc.* 1 Cor 12:10.
- ⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts (TNTC)*, (Eerdmans, 1980), 305. Marshall goes on to explain that these men may have been disciples of John the Baptist as they knew something of John's teaching, although John taught about the Spirit (cf. Matt 3:11; John 1:33) of which these men were ignorant. Regardless, they clearly were not born again believers in Jesus Christ.
- ⁷ For evidence that John the Baptist's disciples were primarily Jews see Luke 1:16, 76-77.
- ⁸ Grant R. Osborne, "Tongues, Speaking in" *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (EDT)*, Walter Elwell ed. (Baker, 1984), 1101.
 However, Dr. Osborne makes the confusing statement that the authentication provided by the gift of tongues was, "not for the sake of non-Christians but rather for the sake of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem" (Ibid.). Dr. Osborne would seem only partly right.
 The Jews in Acts 2 were unbelievers when the gift had its authenticating effect on them. In addition, the Apostle Paul clearly says that "**Tongues . . . are a sign . . . for unbelievers**" (1 Cor 14:22). While the Jewish Christians in Acts 11 that Dr. Osborne refers to were Christians, there is a sense in which they were "unbelievers." They did not believe that non-Jews could get saved, and therefore, the gift of tongues operated in a sense as an authenticating sign to Jewish unbelievers as described in this section.
- ⁹ While the Apostle Paul no doubt intends 14:22 to be a clear and definitive statement of what the gift of tongues is, many commentators find it, "to be one of the most difficult verses" in the entire epistle (Thiselton, 1122). The statement that the gift of "**tongues [is] a sign . . . for unbelievers**" and therefore applicable to unbelievers, not believers, is clear enough in the book of Acts. The unnecessary confusion comes when trying to apply such a statement to the modern, pagan, private prayer language version.
 Accordingly, Dr. Thiselton offers four different views of how the gift of tongues could be a sign to unbelievers, and remarkably never includes a view that involves seeing them in light of Acts, which would apply a foundational rule of biblical interpretation.
 Along these lines, J. B. Phillips was apparently so confused about the gift of tongues, that in his *New Testament in Modern English* translation he writes, "tongues are a sign of God's power, not for those who are unbelievers but to those who already believe," completely distorting the Apostle's statement.
- ¹⁰ Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* (Hendrickson, 1998), 229.

¹¹ For example, B. C. Johanson argues that verse 22 is actually a rhetorical question and something that the Corinthians were stating about the gift of tongues ("Tongues, A Sign for Unbelievers?: A Structural and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians *xiv.20-25*," *NTS* 25 (1979), 193ff.). This completely dismisses how the whole argument from v. 21-25 is held together in the Greek and is clearly the words of Paul, including the quote from Isaiah.

¹² Cf. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1998), 1075. See also Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity And Its Hellenistic Environment Prophecy*, (J. C. B. Mohr, 1995), 180; and Turner, 230.

¹³ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT)* (Eerdmans, 1987), 682.

¹⁴ Grudem, 1075.

¹⁵ Turner, 230.

¹⁶ Mr. Forbes seems wrong to assume, "Paul cites Isaiah 28:11 with very little regard for the nuances of the context" (180). On the contrary, some have pointed out that Isaiah 28 is not the only passage in the OT which deals with the significance of foreign tongues to the Jews. When tongues occur in the OT, an important pattern becomes evident:

1) God has a message for the people, 2) The people refuse to listen to God, 3) God causes tongues to be heard as a sign of judgment, and 4) Dispersion follows. This pattern is demonstrated in Genesis: 1) 9:11,7; 2) 11:4; 3) 11:7; 4) 11:8; Deuteronomy 28: 1) 1; 2) 15; 3) 49; 4) 64-65; Jeremiah: 1) 4:1; 2) 5:3; 3) 5:15; 4) 5:19, and Isaiah 28: 1) 12a; 2) 12b; 3) 11; 4) 13.

Accordingly, many have pointed out that the Apostle's reference to Isaiah 28 in 1 Corinthians 14 reflects the perspective that tongues was a *negative* sign to the Jews, a sign of judgment. Sinclair B. Ferguson writes:

For Paul, tongues serve partly as the sign of God's judgment on his covenant people. What marks the reversal of Babel and indicates the universality of the new covenant also signals judgment on the covenant people for the rejection of Christ. Babylon reversed is, in another sense, Jerusalem judged ('their loss means riches for the Gentiles', Rom. 11:12). The use of languages other than the common covenant tongue is a sign of divine hostility. (*The Holy Spirit* [Intervarsity, 1996], 213).

Likewise, Dr. Carson writes:

[W]hen God speaks through strange tongues and the lips of foreigners to unbelievers . . . it is a sign of his judgment upon them. . . . It may have been that some believers in Corinth were justifying their indiscriminating overemphasis on tongues by extolling their virtue as a witness to unbelievers, as a *sign* to them of God's powerful presence in the life of the church. [This certainly would have been the reason for its practice among the pagan mystery cults

popular in Corinth].

Paul replies, in effect: Yes, you are partly right. Tongues are a sign for unbelievers. But if you examine how the Scriptures describe the relationship between unbelievers and "strange" (e.g., foreign and unknown) tongues, you discover that they constitute a *negative* sign. They are a sign of God's commitment to bring judgment (*Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* [Baker, 1987], 113-14).

See also O. P. Robertson, "Tongues: Sign of the Covenantal Curse and Blessing," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975), 45-53. For an attempted rebuttal of these views see Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Washington, 1972), 185-201.

Human reason and language is the Creator's ordained means of communication, whether with Him, or other humans. It should not be forgotten that when God said in reference to our ancestors, "**Come let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other**" (Gen 11:7) that it was a means of divine judgment.

All of this again brings a great deal of suspicion and some alarm regarding the modern "tongues" movement. *Glossaists* claim that speaking obscure gibberish apart from their minds is a sign of God's blessing. On the contrary, biblically speaking, it is the sign of divine disapproval, and God's judgment may include the fact that He leaves them in their deceived state.

¹⁷ There is a great deal of literature on the meaning of *ideōtai* in 1 Corinthians 14:23. Dr. Fee succinctly describes the main issues and translates it as a "person taking the place of the unlearned" representing all the rest in the community who at any time must listen to the uninterpreted tongues without understanding. This, after all, is the Apostle's concern throughout the argument." (*First Corinthians*, 673). This also accords well with the general meaning of the NIV translation suggesting these people simply would "not understand" either the foreign language or the purpose & meaning of the gift.

¹⁸ None of this is to say there were no Jewish Christians in the Corinthian church as we read that "**Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord**" (Acts 18:8). Nonetheless, it would seem the Corinthian congregation was overwhelmingly Greek, not Jewish. Accordingly, the NT scholar Leon Morris writes:

We do not ever read of very many Jewish converts at Corinth [in Acts 18]. . . . 1 Corinthians supports Acts in this, because there are very few Jewish names mentioned here (nor are there many in 2 Corinthians) ("Corinthians, the First Epistle to the," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley ed., 4 vols. [Eerdmans, 1988], 1:776).

Indeed, even though Paul "**reasoned in the synagogue**" at Corinth (Acts 18:4), "**the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive**" to which he responded, "**From now on I will go to the Gentiles**" (v. 6). Accordingly, Merrill F. Unger comments:

It would be extremely unlikely that even a few unsaved Jews would be among those attending such an early (Gentile) church service. The religious or dispensational barrier was too great for them to hurdle. The tongues, accordingly, were pointless as far as a sign to unsaved Gentiles and offensive to them because of the confusion created (*NT Teaching on Tongues* [Kregel, 1971], 117).

The Corinthian church was indeed essentially a Gentile Greek church, Dr. Morris noting that because it was a Roman colony it had a substantial Gentile element and that "the NT links many Latin names [of people] with Corinth" (*ISBE*, 1:775; See Rom. 16:21ff., 1 Cor. 16:17, and Acts 18:7f.).

- ¹⁹ Augustine, *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, VI. 10, online at ccel.org.
- ²⁰ Chrysostom, *1 Corinthians Homily*, 36. online at ccel.org.
- ²¹ Zane C. Hodges, "The Purpose of Tongues," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, CXX (July-September, 1963), 227.
- ²² Unger, 75-6.
- ²³ L. T. Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* (Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 125.
- ²⁴ It could be argued that "**exalting God**" and "**prophesying**" were separate acts from "**speaking in tongues**" and that they were done in a human language with meaningful content while the tongues speech was not. However, the first occurrence of tongues described in Acts 2:11 says, "**we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!**," clearly describing the content of the tongues to be human language and containing meaningful speech. It would seem best to conclude that the content of the tongues in Acts 10 and 19 were similar, and Luke gives us no reason to think otherwise, using the Greek *glossais* to describe the phenomenon in every instance.
- ²⁵ For further discussion of the minds necessary part in any spiritual edification see chapter 12.11.
- ²⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History Church History*, trans. G. A. Williamson, ed. Andrew Louth, (Penguin Books, 1989), Book III, ch. 39, sec. 15.