
Chapter 12.2

**The Biblical Gift of Tongues Was
A Real Human Language**

Not Gibberish

Table of Topics

- A) The Biblical Evidence**
- B) The Historical Evidence**
- C) Answering Modern Arguments to the Contrary**

Extras & Endnotes

Primary Points

- Acts provides the clearest description of the real gift of tongues, which describes it as the miraculous ability to speak a real human language, primarily as a sign to Jews of new divine revelation.
- This agrees perfectly with Paul's most definitive statement on the nature of the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians: "**Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers**" (v. 22).
- Anyone who wishes to interpret the gift of tongues as anything other than the miraculous ability to speak in a real human foreign language has over 1900 years of universal agreement in the Church against them.
- It has been proven conclusively that the contemporary use of "tongues" does not have anything to do with human languages.
- When the Apostle writes, "**anyone who speaks in [an unknown] tongue does not speak to men. . . . Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit**" (v. 2), he is not introducing a second version of the gift of tongues, different from that described in Acts. Rather, he is simply referring to an obscure utterance made in the assembly by someone claiming it to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, which the Apostle required to be tested by miraculous interpretation, or otherwise those who wanted to speak it were to "**keep quiet**" (1 Cor 14:28) because it was not a real spiritual gift.
- The idea that the real gift of tongues is the language of Angels seems unlikely for several reasons.
- It is ironic that *charismaticism* depends so much on the Acts of the Apostles for its doctrines and practices, but on the issue of tongues, has completely rejected its teaching.

A) The Biblical Evidence

We begin our study by discussing several characteristics of the gift of tongues as it is described in Scripture. The first time the gift is recorded in Scripture is in Acts 2:1-11. This passage is also the clearest description of the gift of tongues and the best place to start in order to understand what it is. The phenomenon is recorded as occurring two other times in Acts (cf. 10:44-46; 19:1-6). It is not until the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that we encounter the gift of tongues again where he mentions the spiritual gift of "**speaking in different kinds of tongues**" (1 Cor 12:10, 28), and its accompanying gift of "**the interpretation of tongues**" (12:10, 28). It is in 1 Corinthians 12-14 that Paul gives some rather extensive teaching on the gift of tongues. From these passages in Acts and in 1 Corinthians we will discover several biblical attributes of how and why the gift of tongues operated in the early Church.

First, we will begin with Acts 2:1-11 where Luke records:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues [glossais: "languages"] as the Spirit [miraculously] enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language [dialektō: "human language"]. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language [dialektō]? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues! [glossais: "languages"]" (Acts 2:1-11)

In the first occurrence of tongues recorded in the NT, it is evident that the Apostles were miraculously speaking in real foreign

human languages. By foreign, we do not mean inhuman, but a real known human language spoken by humans somewhere on the Earth. Accordingly, the Apostles were recognized as "**Galileans**" (v. 7) who naturally would not know the languages of "**Jews from every nation under Heaven**" (v. 5). Yet all of these Jews heard the Apostles "**speaking in his own** [foreign human] **language** [*dialektō*]" (v. 6). There is no doubt here that the spiritual gift of tongues was the miraculous ability to speak in foreign human languages.¹

Luke's use of the Greek words *dialektos* ("**language**") and *glossais* ("**tongues**") are intentional, and are obviously synonymous in the passage (cf. vs. 6,11). *Dialektos* is always used in the NT to refer to a human language or dialect (cf. Acts 1:19, 2:6, 8; 21:40; 22:2; 26:14). *glossais*² ("**tongues**") is used in three different ways in the NT, as *Vine's Expository Dictionary* relates:

Is used of (1) the "tongues . . . as of fire" which appeared at Pentecost; . . . [2] "a [human] language," . . . seven times in the Apocalypse, . . . [3] the supernatural gift of speaking in another language without it having been learned.³

John's consistent references to "**tongues**" in the Revelation to refer to human languages is particularly clear. For example he writes: "**After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and** [real human] **language** [*glossōn*]" (7:9; cf. 5:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). Also, the word group *glossais* is used in the Greek OT (LXX) to refer to real human language (cf. Isa 28:11; 66:18; Ezek 3:5; Zech 8:23). There is no doubt that the word *glossais* refers to real human languages.

It is significant then that throughout Acts, Luke uses this same Greek word to refer to the gift of tongues. In Acts 10, when the first Gentiles are regenerated, we read that the Apostle Peter and those accompanying him, "**heard them speaking in tongues** [*glossais*: "real human languages"] **and praising God**" (v. 46). Accordingly, when the Apostle is later describing this incident as proof to the Jerusalem church that Gentiles can be saved, he says, "**the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning**" (Acts 11:15) and he insisted that "**God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us**" (11:17). The Apostle is obviously specifically referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit Himself, and not tongues, but his language leaves little doubt that the reception of the Spirit at the house of Cornelius was manifested in the ability to miraculously speak in real, although foreign, human languages just as it had been at Pentecost.⁴

In the third and final occurrence of tongues recorded by Luke in Acts 19, we read, **"When Paul placed his hands on [some new converts], the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues [glossais] and prophesied"** (v. 6). Luke again uses the same Greek word to describe the phenomenon and there is no reason to think that it differed from the previous occurrences. In addition, those present knew the new believers had **"prophesied"** and therefore understood what the tongues-speakers were saying with no need of translation, which certainly argues that the utterance was in a real human language.

Luke's use of *glossais* to refer to the gift of tongues is reflected in Mark 16:17 as well where we read: **"And these signs will accompany those who believe: In My name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues [glossais]."** This is a clear reference to the gift of tongues and the word for real human languages is used.

It is evident too that authentic, Holy Spirit empowered tongues speaking in the Corinthian church was human languages. Like Luke, the Apostle Paul invariably uses *glossias* to refer to speaking in tongues, including his first mention of it: **"To one there is given through the Spirit . . . speaking in different kinds of tongues [glossais: "real human languages"], and to still another the interpretation [ermeneia] of tongues [glossais: "real human languages"]"** (12:8, 10). In 13:1, in a list of Christian spiritual gifts he describes the gift of tongues as **"the tongues [glossais: "real human languages"] of men."**

In the context of speaking in tongues, the Apostle speaks of human languages throughout 1 Corinthians 14. When referring to the gift in 14:21 he says, **"In the Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues [heteroglossois: "real, although foreign human languages"] and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people."**⁵ Here, the Apostle is clearly relating the concept of **"tongues"** to the speech of **"foreigners."**

Likewise, the Apostle writes in this chapter concerning tongues:

Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue [glossa], how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of [real human] languages [phōnōn] in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. (1 Cor 14:9-11).

While the Apostle does not use *glossais* here, he is certainly relating the idea of real human languages to the phenomenon of the gift of tongues.⁶

Additional evidence that the Apostle expected an utterance given through the gift of tongues to be in the form of a real human language is his insistence that someone must “**interpret**” (*diermeneuo*; cf. 1 Cor 14:8, 13, 27) the tongues utterance. *Vine’s* says the word is a “strengthened form of *hermeneuo*,”⁷ which invariably in the NT means to translate real human words (cf. John 1:38, 42; 9:7; Heb 7:2). *Diermeneuo* is also clearly used to mean the translation of real human language in Acts 9:36 where we read, “**In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated [*diermeneuo*], is Dorcas).**”

Accordingly, the *New Bible Dictionary* agrees that, “A definite linguistic form is suggested by the Greek words for ‘to interpret,’ which elsewhere in the NT, except Luke 24:27, always mean ‘to translate.’”⁸ Therefore, when *diermeneuo* is not used to describe the exposition of Scripture (as in Luke 24:27), it simply means “to translate what has been spoken or written in a [real human] foreign language into the vernacular.”⁹ The interpretation that the Apostle speaks of is clearly one of *translation*, not *exposition*, and therefore, he expects the gift of tongues to involve real human languages.¹⁰

Finally, it is clear that the Jewish bystanders in Acts 2 believed that the gift of tongues was a miracle. The only way this could be recognized in the Apostle’s speech was if the tongues involved real human languages that could be understood. Speaking in an unlearned foreign human language would be recognized as such a miracle and that is precisely what the gift was. On the other hand, mere gibberish in something other than a real human language would not have been considered a miracle.

It is ironic that *charismaticism*¹¹ depends so much on the Acts of the Apostles for its doctrines and practices, but on the issue of tongues, has completely rejected its teaching. We should be extremely wary of a movement that picks and chooses from Scripture what it wants to believe and practice based on desires that obviously have little to do with pleasing God.

B) The Historical Evidence

It is because of such clear biblical evidence that the gift of tongues was the miraculous ability to speak in a foreign human language which the speaker did not know, that the first Pentecostals in America believed the same. Perhaps the most

foundational historical event for modern Pentecostalism was the “tongues speaking” that began with the ministry of Charles Parham (1873-1929), the recognized father of *glossaism*. He described the first occurrence of what he considered to be the gift of tongues as a woman who “began speaking the Chinese language.”¹²

Accordingly, Parham once said:

One need only receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit [manifested by the gift of tongues] and he could go to the farthest corners of the world and preach to the natives in languages unknown to the speaker.¹³

Not surprisingly, Pentecostal historian Vinson Synan relates that when Parham’s teaching was put to the test by missionary Alfred Garr in India “it ended in failure.”¹⁴ The founder of *glossaism* was correct, of course, to claim that the real gift of tongues was the miraculous ability to speak in foreign human languages unknown to the speaker. However, we believe he was wrong to think any one he knew actually had the gift.

Why the original members of *glossaism* believed differently than their modern counterparts is something that, to our knowledge, has never been specifically addressed by them. At the very least, contemporary *glossaists* have to claim that the founders of their movement misunderstood the biblical gift of tongues. On the contrary, they correctly understood that it was the miraculous ability to speak a real foreign human language. It is modern *glossaism* that has redefined the gift in order to conform to the non-miraculous, pagan version it practices.

The early Pentecostals’ view of the gift of tongues was simply a reflection of what the Bible teaches and how the Church had historically viewed the gift since its inception. Accordingly, Irenaeus (c. 180), the second century Church Father in the West, writes concerning those in his day:

who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of [real human] languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God.¹⁵

Likewise, in the Eastern Church, Origen (c. 185-254) referenced the gift of tongues several times in his works. Cecil M. Robeck, Professor of Church History at Fuller, shows conclusively that the third century Church leader believed the gift of tongues was the miraculous ability to speak in real foreign human languages when he writes:

Origen argued that [Paul’s reference to speaking in tongues] was a reference to the fact that Paul had received the gift of

speaking in the languages of all nations. Such a statement may show that Origen's position on the subject of speaking in tongues came as a result of interpreting 1 Corinthians in light of Luke's account of Pentecost [as it should]. . . .

Such a definition for speaking in tongues, then, carries with it the implicit understanding that the gift of interpretation of tongues involves mere translation. This idea comes clear in another of Origen's works in which he notes that tongues cease when the speaker in tongues finds someone with whom s/he is able to converse (cf. *Homily on Exodus* 13.2).¹⁶

Along the same lines, the fourth century Church leader in the West, St. Augustine (354-430):

With a view to this fellowship they to whom He first came spake with the tongues of all nations. Because as by tongues the fellowship of mankind is more closely united; so it behoved that this fellowship of the sons of God and members of Christ which was to be among all nations should be signified by the tongues [real human languages] of all nations; that as at that time he was known to have received the Holy Ghost, who spake with the tongues of all nations.¹⁷

Augustine's contemporary in the East, Chrysostom (ca. 349-407), said in his teaching on 1 Corinthians that the gift of tongues was intended to reverse the effects of the judgment at the Tower of Babel and that, "the gift was called the gift of tongues because he could all at once speak divers [real human] languages."¹⁸

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) likewise wrote:

Christ's first disciples were chosen by Him in order that they might disperse throughout the whole world, and preach His faith everywhere, according to Mat. 28:19, "Going . . . teach ye all nations." Now it was not fitting that they who were being sent to teach others should need to be taught by others, either as to how they should speak to other people, or as to how they were to understand those who spoke to them; and all the more seeing that those who were being sent were of one nation, that of Judea . . .

Moreover those who were being sent were poor and powerless; nor at the outset could they have easily found someone to interpret their words faithfully to others, or to explain what others said to them, especially as they were sent to unbelievers. Consequently it was necessary, in this respect, that God should provide them with the gift of tongues; in order that, as the diversity of tongues was brought upon the nations when they fell away to idolatry, according to Gn. 11,

so when the nations were to be recalled to the worship of one God a remedy to this diversity might be applied by the gift of tongues.¹⁹

Likewise, Aquinas wrote in his commentary on 1 Corinthians: But the faculty of speaking persuasively consists in being able to speak intelligibly to others. This can be prevented in two ways: in one way by a diversity of dialects. Against this is applied the remedy signified by what he says: "to another is given various kinds of tongues," namely, in order that he be able to speak in diverse languages, so that he will be understood by all, as it says of the apostles in Ac (2:4) that they spoke in various languages.²⁰

In fact, anyone who wishes to interpret the gift of tongues as anything other than the miraculous ability to speak in a real human foreign language has over 1900 years of universal agreement in the Church against them. We know of no early Church Fathers, medieval Church leaders, or Reformers who had any other view of the issue, and ones like Irenaeus, Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, Jerome, Theodore, Cyril, Theodoret, Aquinas, Photius, Erasmus, Calvin,²¹ Luther, and Hodge held this view.²²

The latter theologian, reflected the essential universal consensus of not only the 19th century in which he lived, but all previous centuries of Christianity when he described the biblical gift of tongues as:

the ability to speak in [real human] languages primarily unknown to the speakers. The nature of this gift is determined by the account given in Acts 2:4-11.²³

It is only with the relatively recent need in *glossaism* to validate their nonmiraculous, obscure, and pagan version of the gift of tongues that anything otherwise has been claimed by Christians.

C) Answering Modern Arguments to the Contrary

The fact that both Scripture and Church history presents the gift of tongues as consisting of real human languages in order to exhibit a miracle, creates what would seem to be an insurmountable obstacle to *glossaists* who wish to label their practice as "biblical." The reason is that it has been proven conclusively that the contemporary use of "tongues" does not have anything to do with human languages. Accordingly, the eminent theologian J. I. Packer, Professor of Systematic Theology at Regent agrees:

As for the tongues spoken for two generations in Pentecostal churches and nowadays by millions of [*glossaists*] also, linguists, sociologists, doctors, psychologists, and pastors have studied them firsthand with some thoroughness . . . Whatever [*glossaists*] may believe to the contrary, glossolalia is not [real human] language in the ordinary sense.²⁴

Likewise, the pro-Charismatic H. Newton Malony, Professor of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, admits in an article in the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* that, "no research has proven these utterances to be understandable in the syntax or semantics of any extant [real human] language."²⁵ Would this have been the conclusion at the first occurrence of tongues recorded in Acts 2?

Along the same lines, NT scholar D. A. Carson writes:

To my knowledge there is universal agreement among linguists who have taped and analyzed thousands of examples of modern tongues-speaking that the contemporary phenomenon is not any human language.²⁶

This is a significant admission on Dr. Carson's part, who is generally supportive of *glossaist* doctrine, because he also writes:

I register my conviction that what Luke describes at Pentecost are real, known, human languages. . . . On balance, then, the evidence favors the view that Paul thought the gift of tongues was a gift of real languages, that is, languages that were cognitive [containing meaning to a human]. Moreover, if he knew of the details of Pentecost (a currently unpopular opinion in the scholarly world, but in my view eminently defensible), his understanding of tongues must have been shaped to some extent by that event.²⁷

Here then is the undeniable fact: The biblical gift of tongues was the ability to miraculously speak in a real foreign human language in its recorded occurrences in the book of Acts, and this is an attribute reflected elsewhere in Scripture as well. Yet no one today can find a trace of such a thing happening, even though millions want to claim to possess the gift. In other words, no one today can duplicate what occurred in the book of Acts, and yet many want to claim the same gift.

This is why, as with other miraculous biblical gifts, *glossaism* has redefined the gift of tongues into something non-miraculous and which they *can* duplicate, such as a "private prayer language." Accordingly, the *glossaist* Dr. Turner says:

Not surprisingly, many [*glossaist*] leaders have acknowledged that the evidence at present is against the view that tongues are usually miracles of xenolalia (human languages).²⁸

They were in the early Church Dr. Turner, and in the claim of Charles Parham, the founder of the modern tongues movement, and if they are not now then the phenomenon needs to be labeled something other than the biblical gift of tongues.

Understandably, theologians of *glossaism* have attempted to argue that the gift was not the miraculous ability to speak in a real foreign human language. For example, Wayne Grudem, Research Professor of Bible and Theology at Phoenix Seminary, rejects the Greek meaning of *glossais* when he writes in his popular *Systematic Theology*:

Some have objected that since *glossa* . . . in Greek (outside the New Testament) refers to known human languages, it must refer to known [human] languages in the New Testament as well. But this objection is not convincing, since there was no other word in Greek better suited to refer to this phenomenon.²⁹

First, Dr. Grudem is suggesting that we assume the Apostle himself had redefined the commonly held understanding of *glossais* in his own day. Was this the habit of NT writers? Imagine if we just widely assumed that the Greek of the NT did not reflect the meanings of common (*koinē*) Greek spoken by the people of the day? Dr. Grudem's suggestion sets a dangerous precedence that he would follow perhaps nowhere else in the Bible.

Secondly, his claim that "there was no other word in Greek better suited to refer to" the unrecognizable utterances occurring in the Corinthian congregation is simply not true. The Greek word *phōnē* meant "an audible sound made by a living creature, and covered the whole range of animal noises or human sounds."³⁰

If, in fact, as Dr. Grudem suggest, that the gift of tongues was incoherent utterances, *phōnē* would have been an excellent word for the NT writers to use. Likewise, the word *rhēma* meant, "word, utterance," and is also well suited to the idea that modern tongues is a divinely inspired expression. But the NT writers consistently use *glossais* because it means real human languages, not just utterances.

Elsewhere, Dr. Grudem says that the Apostle cannot be speaking of human language when referring to the gift of tongues because he consistently says that a tongue utterance will not be understood (cf. 1 Cor 14:2, 16, 23).³¹ However, this does nothing to prove that the utterance is not in a real *foreign* human language.

If it was, and no native speaker was present, then it still would not be understood. The Apostle makes it obvious in 1 Corinthians 14 that the reason that something spoken through the authentic gift of tongues is not understood, is due to the fact that the utterance is not miraculously *translated*, not that it comes in the form of something that is not a real human language.

In addition, Dr. Grudem quotes from the 1929 commentary on Corinthians from the respected NT scholars Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer who claim that when the Apostle says, "**I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all**" (1 Cor. 14:18), it is: "strong evidence that Tongues are not foreign languages." Dr. Grudem goes on to write:

If they were known foreign languages that foreigners could understand, as at Pentecost, why would Paul speak more than all the Corinthians in private, where no one would understand, rather than in church where foreign visitors could understand?

32

Why indeed? Dr. Grudem would have us assume that the Apostle practiced his gift "in private" when the Apostle says nothing of the sort. The reason that he miraculously spoke in foreign languages more than the Corinthians was because its purpose was to authenticate new divine revelation, which, of course, was a large part of his apostolic ministry. Paul's miraculous speaking in foreign languages was never "in private," as Grudem would have us assume, but rather, *in public* for others to witness and recognize as miraculous.

Of course, the strongest biblical evidence that the gift of tongues was not a foreign human language is the Apostle's statement in 1 Corinthians that, "**anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men. . . . Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit**" (v. 2). This statement will occupy a large part of the next chapter and is admittedly difficult to interpret.³³ Why would the Apostle describe speaking in a "tongue" as something completely different than the way the gift of tongues operated in Acts 2?

There are two possible answers. One, the Apostle is introducing an entirely different kind of the biblical gift of tongues, a second version from that which is recorded in Acts and which manifested itself in non-miraculous gibberish. However, even if this is the case, modern *glossaism* has no explanation for why they cannot duplicate the miraculous version described in Acts.

Another explanation of the Apostle's reference to a "**tongue**" (*glossa*, the first time the phenomenon is referred to in the singular, rather than the plural *glossais* "tongues") is that he is distinguishing it from the real gift of tongues, because neither he nor anyone else

could assume that an obscure, uninterpreted utterance *was* the gift of tongues! Was he, (or we) to assume that anyone who utters gibberish in the Christian assembly is doing so by the Holy Spirit and possesses the biblical gift of tongues? As we will argue elsewhere, the Apostle's hesitancy to automatically label such utterances in an "unknown tongue" as the authentic gift of tongues is understandable because praying in incoherent gibberish to look and feel spiritual was a common practice in the temples of the Greek mystery religions popular in Corinth at the time.

Therefore, when the Apostle writes, "**anyone who speaks in [an unknown] tongue does not speak to men. . . . Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit**" (v. 2), he is not introducing a second version of the gift of tongues, different from that described in Acts. Rather, he is simply referring to an obscure utterance made in the assembly by someone claiming it to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, which the Apostle required to be tested by miraculous interpretation, or otherwise those who wanted to speak it were to "**keep quiet**" (1 Cor 14:28).

Finally, on the topic of the gift of tongues involving human languages, some have claimed that the Apostle's reference to speaking "**in the tongues of . . . Angels**" (1 Cor 13:1) refers to the gift of tongues. Even the rather liberal Baptist NT scholar, J. D. G. Dunn, has written: "In short, the most obvious conclusion is that Paul thought of glossolalia as speaking the language(s) of heaven."³⁴ Likewise, the Pentecostal NT scholar Gordon Fee writes:

Our most likely entre into Paul's understanding [of tongues] is to be found in his description of the phenomenon in I Cor 13:1 as "the tongues of Angels" [not Acts?!]. The context virtually demands that this phrase refers to glossolalia. The more difficult matter is its close conjunction with "the tongues of people." Most likely this refers to two kinds of glossolalia: human speech, inspired of the Spirit but unknown to the speaker or hearers, and angelic speech, inspired of the Spirit to speak in the heavenly dialect. The historical context in general suggests that the latter is what the Corinthians understood glossolalia to be, and that therefore they considered it one of the evidences of their having already achieved something of their future heavenly status.³⁵

First, let us notice that Dr. Fee has now added a third, supposedly legitimate, variety of the gift of tongues. In addition to how it operated at Pentecost as a miraculous ability to speak real foreign human languages, a fact which Dr. Fee seems to completely ignore, he claims that the Apostle is introducing "two [additional]

kinds of glossolalia: human speech. . . unknown to the hearers [contra Acts], and angelic speech [definitely contra Acts]."

Nonetheless, the idea that the real gift of tongues is the language of Angels seems unlikely for several reasons. First of all, is this how the gift worked in Acts? One of the most important rules of accurate Bible interpretation is to use the clear passages to interpret the unclear ones. *Glossaism* continually violates this and we are surprised that such a respected exegete as Dr. Fee would provide one of the best examples of this error.

If we want to be true to God's word instead of our agendas, we had better find a way to understand the Apostle's reference to "**the tongues of . . . Angels**" that does not contradict what we know of the real gift of tongues elsewhere in the NT, including Paul's statement a few verses later that, "**Tongues . . . are a sign . . . for unbelievers**" (14:22). "Angelic speech," as Dr. Fee calls it, would have absolutely nothing to do with the first and clearest description we have of the gift of tongues in Acts, and it would not be a "**sign**" of anything to "**unbelievers.**"

Secondly, even if the Apostle is referring to a real language that Angels use, it is used by Angels and is contrasted in the same sentence with "**the tongues of men.**" To interpret the language of Angels as something humans would use totally misses the Apostle's distinction between the two.

Thirdly, it is not clear at all that an angelic language even exists. We notice in the next verse that the Apostle mentions something that is clearly impossible and intended to be hyperbole: "**If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom [eido: understand] all mysteries and all knowledge . . .**" (1 Cor 13:2). Such human knowledge does not exist, even with the supernatural gift of prophecy. The clearest interpretation of these phrases would be that *even if* a human could do the impossible (speak in some angelic language or know everything), but they did it without love, it is useless. In addition, we have no other reference to such a thing in the Scriptures and Angels are always portrayed as speaking in a language that humans readily understood.³⁶

Finally, the *glossaist's* insistence that their "private prayer language" is "an angelic language" may have more to do with the occult and outright heresy than Christianity. The *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* states that historically, the ones who have emphasized an "angel language" have been occultists.³⁷

Therefore, we reject the efforts of *glossaism* to ignore the clear biblical evidence in the book of Acts and elsewhere in the NT that the gift of speaking in tongues (*glossais*: "real human languages") was the miraculous ability to speak in a foreign human language that the speaker did not know, and rather to claim that the gift is

the non-miraculous ability to pray in gibberish or the languages of Angels.³⁸

Extras & Endnotes

A Devotion to Dad

*Our Father in Heaven, we sometimes grow weary of all the ways that Your word gets twisted. While the truth can be explained in a paragraph, it requires pages to refute error. Give us the grace and patience necessary to **"hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that [we] can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it** (Tit 1:9), even on an issue like speaking in tongues.*

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) Where in Scripture do we claim is the clearest description of the real gift of tongues? What are some characteristics of it there? What definition of the gift could be concluded from this first occurrence of the gift?
- 2) What are some examples in Scripture of the gift of tongues being used as a miraculous sign gift of new divine revelation to Jews? How does this relate to the Apostle's definition of the gift in 1 Corinthians 14:22?
- 3) How has the Church viewed the gift of tongues up until the popularity of the Pentecostal movement? What does this say about its modern redefinition?
- 4) What evidence is there that the modern version of the gift of tongues has nothing to do with a real human language as it did in Acts? How does this affect the modern claim to the gift?
- 5) Why do we reject the idea that the real gift of tongues is the language of Angels?

- 6) Why do we claim that on the issue of the gift of tongues, *charismaticism* ironically abandons Acts as a source of their doctrine and practice?

Recommended Reading

- The rest of Book 12 of *Knowing Our God* for a fuller biblical refutation of *glossaist* claims.
- Thomas R. Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit* (Kregel Resources, 1996). If we only had one book to recommend on the topic of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit this one would be it.
- *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, Wayne Grudem ed. (Zondervan, 1996). A good description and comparison of four views on the miraculous spiritual gifts. Presents several issues that must be addressed in correctly teaching on this subject, and brings up several questions that we attempt to answer in this section of KOG.

Publications & Particulars

¹ However, some Charismatic theologians, including it would seem J. Rodman Williams, support the idea that the tongues phenomenon in Acts 2 was a gift of *hearing* something in a foreign language, rather than speaking it (cf. "Charismatic Movement" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (EDT), Walter Elwell ed. [Baker, 1984], 206; see also L. T. Johnson, "Tongues, Gift of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman ed., 8 vols. (Doubleday, 1992), VI:597; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 2000], 977-8). Such a position would seem to completely ignore the clear statement in Acts 2:4 that the Apostles, "**began to speak in other tongues** [*glossais*: "languages"] **as the Spirit** [miraculously] **enabled them** [not the hearers]."

The *New Bible Dictionary* (NBD) adds:

Although it is generally agreed that Luke intended the phrase 'to speak in other tongues' [in Acts 2] to mean that the disciples spoke in foreign languages, some have seen in v. 8 evidence of a miracle of hearing performed on the audience. Many rejected this view on the ground that it transfers the miracle from the disciples to the unconverted multitude. It also overlooks the fact that speaking in tongues began before there was any audience (v. 4; cf. v. 6). (J. I. Packer, *et al.* eds., 3rd ed., [Inter-Varsity, 1996], 1195).

On this point Dr. Carson adds:

It goes beyond the text to argue that this was a miracle of hearing rather than one of speech. For Luke's purpose is to associate the descent of the Spirit with the Spirit's activity *among the believers*, not to postulate a miracle of the Spirit *among those who were still unbelievers*" (*Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* [Baker, 1987], 138).

More eloquently, *glossaists* Max Turner writes:

We may not seriously doubt that Luke attributed the fundamental charisma in this process to the activity of God in the one hundred and twenty believers. He would not wish to suggest that the apostolic band merely prattled incomprehensibly, while God worked the yet greater miracle of interpretation of tongues in the unbelievers. (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* [Hendrickson, 1998], 223)

In addition, it would seem best to conclude that each of the tongues speakers in Acts 2 spoke in a number of different languages at different times (instead of simultaneously) throughout this event because "**Jews from every nation under heaven . . . heard them speaking in their own language**" (2:5-6). In other words, the Apostle John who was certainly present, may have been "**declaring the wonders of God**" (v. 11) for several minutes and during that time shifted from language to language. This would easily explain how so many different nationalities may have heard the speaking in their own language without it being "a miracle of hearing."

Finally, the Apostle's mention of a gift of "**interpretation of tongues**" (1 Cor 12:10, 30), and his insistence that a potential utterance being made with the gift would also need interpretation if native speakers were not present, all argue against the idea that the miracle of the gift of tongues was inherent in the hearers.

- ² *Glossa*, the singular form is also used in Scripture to refer to the physical human tongue.
- ³ *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Thomas Nelson, 1996), 636.
- ⁴ The fact that some of the audience at Pentecost, "**made fun of them** [the Apostles speaking in foreign languages] **and said, "They have had too much wine"**" (Acts 2:13), provides no support for suggesting that their speech did not have meaning or was not in actual human languages. All it means is that the tongues utterances were not in the language of all of those present. In other words, a Russian who had never heard Spanish may indeed think that a Spanish speaker was drunk, and vice versa. It is probable, in fact, that the mockers were locals who did not speak the dialects that the others did.
- ⁵ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)* states that "the quotation in 1 Cor. 14:21 from Isa. 28:11 f. (*en heteroglossois*, by people of foreign tongues), ...originally referred to a foreign human language, [and] is applied by Paul to the glossolalia" (Colin Brown, ed., 4 vols., [Zondervan, 1986], 3:1079-80).

⁶ While the Greek word *phōnōn* often means human languages, it more generally refers to sounds of any kind. The view that he has human languages in mind, as reflected in most modern translations, is supported by the fact that the Apostle's illustration involves communication with foreign people.

All of this would seem to refute the opinion of Thomas W. Gillespie, President and Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary who denies that the Apostle meant human languages by *glossais*, and that "Paul coined the technical term "tongues" *ad hoc* in order to deal with the situation in Corinth" (*The First Theologians: A Study in Early Christian Prophecy* [Eerdmans, 1994], 160).

Forbes' claim that "A computerized search of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* failed to produce a single case of the use of the terms" (*Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity And Its Hellenistic Environment Prophecy*, [J. C. B. Mohr, 1995], 45) is unconvincing. Just because no reference to the exact phrase "speaking in tongues" can be found, does not mean that Luke and Paul did not derive their description of the gift of tongues from the commonly understood meaning of "tongues (*glossais*)" as human languages at the time.

Accordingly, Dr. House concludes "the very phrase *glossais lalein*, 'to speak with tongues' was not invented by the New Testament writers, but borrowed from ordinary speech" (139).

⁷ *Vine's*, 330.

⁸ *NBD*, 1196

⁹ J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1962), 250.

¹⁰ A foremost opponent of this view of the interpretation of tongues is Anthony Thiselton who largely bases his case on instances in the writings of Philo and Josephus, but even still admits that *diarmeneuo* "means to *translate* only when the context clearly relates to translation" (976), and that clearly includes the context of the use of *glossais* throughout the NT. For a more in depth refutation of Dr. Thiselton's thesis see especially Forbes, 65-72 and Turner, 227-9.

¹¹ For a definition of *charismaticism* see endnote in chapter 12.1.

¹² Kenneth A. Curtis *et al.*, *The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History* (Baker, 1998), 178.

¹³ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Eerdmans, 1971), 111.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book II, ch. 23, Book V. ch. 6.1, online at ccel.org.

¹⁶ Cecil M. Robeck, "Origen's Treatment of the Charismata" in *Charismatic Experiences in History*, Cecil M. Robeck Jr. ed. (Hendrickson, 1985), 119.

-
- ¹⁷ Augustine, *Sermon 21.8*, online at ccel.org
- ¹⁸ Chrysostom, *Homily on 1 Corinthians*, 35. Cf. ch. 29, online at ccel.org.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q. 176, Art. 1; online at www.newadvent.org/summa
- ²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *1 Corinthians*, para. 729; online at <http://www.aquinas.avemaria.edu/Aquinas-Corinthians.pd>
- ²¹ For example, Calvin writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:10:
 There was a difference between the *knowledge of tongues*, and the *interpretation* of them, for those who were endowed with the former were, in many cases, not acquainted with the language of the nation with which they had to deal. The *interpreters* rendered foreign tongues into the native language. These endowments they did not at that time acquire by labor or study, but were put in possession of them by a wonderful revelation of the Spirit. (online at www.ccel.org.)
- ²² Dr. Thiselton reluctantly admits that the historical view of the Church has been that the gift of tongues involved real human languages, but claims it is only because of the erroneous view of Church that the “interpretation of tongues” referred to translating languages (cf. 974-8). On the contrary, we have offered proof that this was indeed the case and the historical view of the Church was correct on this as well. In addition, Dr. Thiselton only assumes these writers throughout history based their conclusions on the error he suggests, and he completely ignores the clear evidence in Acts that no doubt Church leaders have historically respected, which is something Dr. Thiselton does not.
- ²³ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians First Epistle*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Findex.Com, 2003), 248.
 Dr. Hodge went on to write something that should be seriously considered today:
 Those who depart from the common interpretation of the gift of tongues, differ indefinitely among themselves as to its true nature. Some . . . say that the word means the tongue as the physical organ of utterance; and to speak *with the tongue* is to speak in a state of excitement in which the understanding and will do not control the tongue, which is moved by the Spirit to utter sounds which are as unintelligible to the speaker as to others. But this interpretation . . . is irreconcilable with the account in Acts. Besides it degrades the gift into a mere frenzy. . . .
- It is unnecessary to continue this enumeration of conjectures; what has already been said would be out of place if the opinions referred to had not found favor in England [e.g. Irvingites] and in our own country. The arguments against the common view of the nature of the gift of tongues, (apart from the exegetical difficulties with which it is thought to be encumbered,) are not such as to make much impression upon minds accustomed to reverence the Scriptures (*in loc* 1 Cor 12:10).

-
- ²⁴ J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step With the Spirit* (Revell, 1984), 209-210.
- ²⁵ H. Newton Malony, "Debunking Myths about Glossolalia" in *Charismatic Experiences in History*, Cecil M. Robeck Jr. ed. (Hendrickson, 1985), 103.
- ²⁶ Carson, *Spirit*, 83.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80-81, 83.
- ²⁸ Turner, 309.
- ²⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 1072.
- ³⁰ *NIDNTT*, III:113.
- ³¹ Grudem, 1072.
- ³² *Ibid.* note 43, (underlining added for emphasis).
- ³³ For further comment on 1 Cor 14:2 see chapter 12.9.
- ³⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Westminster Press, 1975), 244.
- ³⁵ Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson, 1994), 890.
- ³⁶ Dr. Fee's reliance on the extra-biblical Jewish writing of *The Testament of Job* to claim that humans could speak a real angelic language is unconvincing at best, and the text he cites for his proof could even be described as "spooky" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT)* [Eerdmans, 1987], 630).
- ³⁷ *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, ed. Melton, J. Gordon, 4th ed., 2 vols., (Gale Research, 1996), 1425.
- ³⁸ Regarding the view that the gift of tongues involved real human languages, Dr. Thiselton notes that, "In more recent scholarship advocates for this view include J. G. Davies ("Pentecost and Glossolalia," 228-31), S. Tugwell ("Did You Receive the Spirit," 9), R. H. Gundry ("'Ecstatic Utterance' (NEB)?" 299-307), and Christopher Forbes (*Prophecy*, 51-65).