The Truth About the Gift of Tongues

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While still active in the charismatic movement, I became disillusioned with the obvious disparity between the bible descriptions and accounts of the charismatic gifts, especially the gift of tongues. So I began a study of the bible and of church history in order to determine the true biblical nature and purpose of the charismatic gifts. I was not seeking to prove or disprove anything, only to discover the true nature of the gifts. Here are the results of that study:

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The PURPOSE of Tongues

God is a God of order and design (1 Cor 14:33). When He does something, He does so with a plan and a goal. The Lord did not speak in parables, for example, in order to be clever or to appear profound. Scripture teaches that He used parables with the express intent of obscuring the truth from the non-elect (Mark 4:11,12). Likewise, miracles and gifts are to be understood in terms of a particular purpose. They served as signs validating the messages which they accompanied (John 20:30,31; Acts 2:43, 4:16; 2 Cor 12:12; Gal 3:5; Rom 15:17-19). The purpose of the impartation of gifts by the Apostles (both scripture and subsequent church history demonstrate that the gifts were bestowed ONLY by the Apostles and no one else — ever), was to validate the Apostles' teachings.

Why do some people claim that tongues is Satanic?

Paul warned Timothy that in latter times many would fall away from the faith, giving heed to "seducing spirits and doctrines of demons." A great majority of bible scholars believe that since Christ rendered Satan and all his demons powerless by His death and resurrection, the only power demons now have is the power of deceit. Demons today, then, are thought to be deceiving angels. They get people to listen to their lies by making their lies attractive and alluring. Paul called them "seducing spirits" (1 Tim 4:1), because they teach false doctrine. A major reason so many folks believe it is Satanic is because there are so many "gifts" which do not validate the Apostles' teaching. Remember the slave girl with "a spirit of divination" who followed the Apostle Paul crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation!" (Acts 16:16-18). It turned out that her "prophesyings" were the work of a demon in spite of her message! Paul cast the demon from her and she stopped prophesying. How could Paul tell that the servant girl's "gift" was demonic? Two reasons:

1. No Apostle had imparted the gift to her, and
2. Her prophesyings used Paul's ministry to validate HER message, a purpose directly opposed to the one intended for genuine gifts of the Spirit. Charismatic gifts today are often used to "validate" someone else's ministry — someone whose teachings are NOT those of the apostles. They use the Apostles' writings and borrow their words, but they use them to give credibility to their OWN ministry. A demon did exactly that in Acts 16!

So it stands to reason that a seducing spirit would use that same tactic today — not to confirm the apostles' doctrine, but the doctrines of a modern-day messenger who teaches something much different.

I. The FORM of Tongues in Scripture: Whenever we see tongues mentioned in the bible, it ALWAYS takes the form of a structured foreign language — never “ecstatic gibberish.”

A) In Acts 2, many people from many places heard the gospel preached IN THEIR OWN DIALECTS. Peter told the crowd that that event was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel (Joel 2:28ff), which makes absolutely no mention of tongues at all but speaks of prophecy, dreams, visions, and SIGNS. Paul later wrote that tongues are “for a SIGN... to unbelievers (1 Cor 14:22).

B) In every event subsequent to the one in Acts 2 where tongues was present, “the Holy Spirit fell on them... JUST AS HE DID ON US AT THE BEGINNING (Acts 11:15-17), which must mean that tongues on those occasions were like the tongues in Acts 2 — a verifiable foreign language, a sign to unbelievers.

C) The Pentecost form of tongues became the paradigm for all later forms of glossolalia. All references in the bible to tongues speaking employ the same basic terminology, implying similarity of form.

D) The Corinthian episodes are defined in terms fully compatible with those in Acts. Paul writes, “no language is without meaning” (1 Cor 14:10). He compares tongues to worldly languages and asserts that all of them have coherent meaning. Tongues, biblically, is certainly not the incoherent babbling gibberish that we see in charismatic and Pentecostal churches today.

II. The CONTENT of Tongues in Scripture: Tongues was a REVELATIONAL gift — a vehicle of revelation from God to man. Tongues brought revelation from God as surely as the gift of prophecy brought revelation from God to the prophets and apostles of old. Thus, tongues must be understood in

scripture to have brought inspired, inerrant, and authoritative communication from God to man:

> A) The first occurrence of tongues is defined as prophetic by Peter (Acts 2:11-18).
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> B) Tongues are almost always related to other revelational gifts in scripture (Acts 2, 19, 1 Cor 13 and 14). In Acts 19 they "spoke with tongues and prophesied." In 1 Corinthians tongues are dealt with at great length in association with prophecy. The difference was that prophecy was the ability to speak infallibly the will of God in one's own language, while tongues was the ability to speak infallibly the will of God in a language one had never learned.
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> C) Tongues are specifically said to be a speaking of mysteries (1 Cor 14:2). When the word MYSTERY is used in scripture it is always in terms of revelation. A mystery spoken becomes a revelation.

The CONTENT of tongues, then, is seen to be infallible, inerrant, inspired revelation of God's mysteries to man. The tongues we see today among Charismatics and Pentecostals surely does not measure up to this lofty biblical standard. In fact in every service I ever attended in twenty years as a charismatic where tongues was used, it NEVER took the form of a discernable foreign language, and its "interpretation" was never treated as an infallible revelation from God. It used to trouble me very deeply that a direct word from Heaven could be treated so lightly by the hearers — instead of writing it down and being careful to obey it and publish it, the people would nod and say, "Thanks, Lord, for that good word," treating it more like a divine Hallmark card greeting than a revelation from the Sovereign Master of the universe. The Almighty is not sitting on His throne blowing kisses to people on the earth — His word should be treated with the utmost

care and held with extreme reverence — just as we claim to treat the bible. But tongues are not treated that way today.

III. The Purpose of Tongues: As I mentioned at the beginning, God is a God of order and design and when He acts, He does so with a purpose and plan. We see that parables had a specific purpose (Mark 4:11,12); that miracles have a particular purpose (Jn 20:30-31, Acts 2:43 and 4:16, Rom 15:17-19, 2 Cor 12:12), and likewise that the gift of tongues served a very specific purpose: They validated the Apostles' message, and they were an anticipated sign of covenant curse upon unbelieving Israel.

> A) Tongues were a sign to validate the message of the apostles (Mark 16:17), and Paul's in particular (Acts 10:44-46, 19:6). ONLY the Apostles had the authority and ability to impart the gift to others through the laying on of hands or prayer. None of the people they laid hands on could pass he Holy Spirit or the gifts on to others. There is not a single instance in scripture or in subsequent church history to support the contention that anyone other than the Apostles could "impart" the Holy Spirit and His gifts. Those who received these sign-gifts at the hands of the Apostles were not able to pass them along to others. If they were, then it would not have been necessary to send Apostles to Samaria in order for them to receive the Holy Spirit (and other examples). The example of Ananias (Acts 9:10-19) is often used to attempt to refute that argument, but the text does not say that Saul spoke in tongues or prophesied. It says only that his eyesight was restored and he was baptized in water. We don't hear any more about Saul until way up there in chapter 13, where the APOSTLES laid hands on him and Barnabus.
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> The fact that Paul passed the charismata to others was one of the proofs that he was to be counted among the

Apostles (Acts 19, 2 Cor 12:12, Eph 3:7ff). It was extremely important to establish Paul's apostleship with "the signs of an Apostle (2 Cor 12:12)," because God's having opened the kingdom of God to the Gentiles was such a radical departure from the old covenant. And it was important that Paul be counted as an Apostle because Paul wrote most of the New Testament. That is why many of his letters to the churches open with the phrase, "Paul, an apostle by the will of God..."

B) Tongues were a sign of covenant curse upon unbelieving Israel. Since this is probably the most neglected and most misunderstood purpose of Tongues, it bears a lot more explaining, so be sure to examine these scriptures closely and in context: Paul explains this use of the sign in 1 Cor 14:21-22: "In the Law it is written, `by men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers will I speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,' says the Lord. So then, TONGUES ARE FOR A SIGN, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign not to unbelievers, but to those who believe" (NASB). Bear with a lengthy explanation now:

> 1) The Old Testament teaches that Israel was a special people to God. He was bound in a special covenantal love to Israel alone among the nations of the earth (Deut 7:6-8, Amos 3:2), thus only they received His law (Deut 4:10-13, Psalm 147:19-20), His oracles (Rom 3:2), the covenantal sign of circumcision (Rom 3:1) — indeed, all the promises and means of covenant life (Rom 9:4-5, Eph 2:12).
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> 2) This covenant with Israel was a two-edged sword. Covenant life was one of both privilege and responsibility. Obedience brought both spiritual and material blessings, and disobedience brought

spiritual and material curses (see Deut 28:1-68 which describes alternate covenant blessings and covenant curses).

3) Israel was a nation of people accustomed to signs (Matt 12:38, 1 Cor 1:20-22). Within the covenant contract they were given warning signs which would serve to indicate that the calamities which would befall them were indeed the judgements of God on them. One of the most often-seen signs was the loss of national freedom and self-rule (Deut 28:49). It is also referred to in similar context in Jer 5:15 and Isa 28:11. In scripture after scripture, foreign tongues were a sign of covenant curse on Israel. Most often it was the language of the foreign occupiers of Israel, but at the dawn of the New Covenant it becomes especially poignant. All of this becomes relevant to the gift of tongues in the New Testament by the fact that Paul applies the sign of covenantal curse (Isa 28:11) to his explanation of the gift of tongues in 1 Cor 14:21-22. The fact that Paul lifted this scripture out of a passage dealing with covenantal curse is extremely significant! To grasp its impact you need to look at the reference Paul is quoting in his 1 Cor 14 discourse — Isa 28. In the very heart of God's rebuke against Israel is the verse Paul quotes... the one that gives the sign of the curse (verse 11). Of course the Isaiah passage referred to the impending Assyrian invasion of Israel, but the Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, applies it further to the future and climactic judgement upon Israel subsequent to their rejection of Christ.

4) Christ, the "Messenger of the Covenant," (Mal 3:1) and "Ratifier of the New Covenant" (Luke

22:20), came to, lovingly courted, and taught Israel. Yet Israel refused His overtures (Matt 23:37, Acts 28:17-31, Rom 9:31-32 and 10:3). The generation to which Christ ministered was rapidly filling up the measure of the guilt of their forefathers (Matt 23:32). Therefore, THAT GENERATION (Matt 23:36 and 24:43) was to receive the fulness of God's covenantal curse: God would send Roman armies (Luke 21:20) to raze the temple (Matt 24:2) which the Lord left desolate (Matt 23:38). Thus the sign of judgement (foreign tongues) was given to Israel for a period of 40 years between Christ's ascension and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans in 70 AD. God was turning from Israel to the Gentiles (Matt 23:37-38; Rom 9:24-29 and 10:19-21).

5) Tongues had a particular relevance to Jewish unbelief in light of the New Covenant. In Acts 2 the Jews in particular were called to attention (verse 12), after which they were charged with having slain the Lord of Glory (v 22-24). The two-edged sword of covenant curse fell hard upon these men, with the result that many were cut to the heart and repented (Acts 2:37) to follow Christ.

6) The Corinthian church itself is further glaring evidence that tongues was a sign of covenantal curse on Israel! Acts 18 records that Paul's 18-month-long ministry at Corinth (verse 11) was characterized by extremely heated opposition from the Jews. While teaching at the Corinthian synagogue, Jewish opponents resisted the gospel to the point of blasphemy, causing Paul to call down a curse upon them (verse 6). Resistance to the gospel was so violent in Corinth that the Lord

appeared to Paul in a vision, promising special protection from harm (verses 12 and 13). In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul makes reference in the opening verses to the Jews and their desire for signs (1 Cor 1:22). Paul's citation of Isaiah 28 should be decisive proof. In chapter 10 Paul dealt at length with "our fathers" and their disobedience and judgement, and warned the Corinthians of the same predicament if they weren't careful (10:1-12).

Tongues then, were "for a sign" — a sign to unbelieving, Christ-rejecting Israel. God's prophesied and anticipated sign of covenantal curse.

IV. The transience of Tongues: Because scripture demonstrates what the PURPOSE of tongues was — to validate the APOSTLES' ministry and to serve as the covenantal sign to Israel, it necessarily follows that once those purposes were achieved, the sign would cease. Even those who believe in modern-day tongues speaking agree that the canon is complete —' thus they cannot possibly use the gift today in the same sense that it was used throughout the New Testament — inerrant, infallible oracles of God to man.

Modern-day manifestations of charismatic gifts defy the biblical and historical form, content, and purpose described in scripture, and thus it is clear that today's form of tongues is an unbiblical counterfeit.

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