

TONGUES OF FIRE

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There has always been a battle between truth and lies, as long as there has been language. It began in the Garden of Eden, when the serpent suggested to Eve, "Has God really said...?"

Today, that battle is out of all proportion! We can no longer trust what we read or what we hear. From phishing emails that try to steal your personal information to weblogs and "fake news," words (and even images) are suspect and information is uncertain.

The greatest danger that I see, is that skepticism (which is appropriate, even wise) can so easily turn into cynicism (the pessimistic suspicion that NOTHING or NO ONE is trustworthy).

Do you believe that Jesus Christ spoke the truth? Are His words authoritative, or just meaningful?

In the four Gospel accounts, Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth," 77 times!

Among His final words of instruction and encouragement, found at the end of Mark's record (Mark 16:17-18), are these: *"And these signs will accompany those who do trust in my name: they will drive out demons, speak with new tongues, not be injured if they handle snakes or drink poison, and heal the sick by laying hands on them."*

I believe those words are true.

We who follow Jesus do not chase after signs, but supernatural signs do follow our faithfulness to Christ.

As we reflect further on the value of the Pentecostal experience (receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives), I choose to focus on just one of these supernatural results: speaking with new tongues. (And by the way, these ARE supernatural...)

As far as I can determine, this prediction was never made before Jesus spoke those words. There are allusions and suggestions in the Old Testament, but Jesus' words are clear. There is no mistaking what He was referring to.

The First Christian Pentecost

Acts 2:4 On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. ² Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house

where they were sitting. ³ Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. ⁴ And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

Twice more in the Book of Acts this resultant ability is specifically mentioned, for it became the “litmus test” for receiving the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 10:44 Even as Peter was saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ The Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, too. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in other tongues and praising God.

Acts 19:6 Then when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied.

One of the most common concerns that is expressed to me by those seeking the baptism with the Spirit is this: “Do I HAVE to speak in tongues?”

“Do I have to???” is the cry of one who is reluctant or resistant. We’ve all heard it from young children.

Let’s move beyond reluctance and fear to simple acceptance by faith. If we believe the sick can be miraculously healed, we should believe also that we may speak in tongues. If we believe that demons can be cast out, we should believe also that we may speak with tongues.

A Marvelous Gift

Paul said to the Corinthian church (14:5), “I wish you could all speak with tongues.”

He plainly acknowledged that it was not the greatest gift (1 Corinthians 13:1): “If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn’t love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

But he did not dismiss the gift as mediocre or without value.

1 Corinthians 14:2 For if you have the ability to speak in tongues, you will be talking only to God, since people won’t be able to understand you. You will be speaking by the power of the Spirit, but it will all be mysterious.

Speaking in tongues as the Holy Spirit enables you, is powerful. You may not feel the power in that moment or understand the words, but it is active and effective, just the same.

1 Corinthians 14:4 A person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally.

Have you ever felt like you've hit a wall in your spiritual growth? Felt listless about worship? Hopeless about prayer? Here's a simple exercise that can turn that around for you. It has done so for me more times than I can count.

1 Corinthians 14:18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than any of you.

When you don't know how else to pray, drop your native tongue and pray in the language the Spirit gives you.

Be Aware

Speaking in tongues does require sensitivity to your surroundings. Are there unbelievers in your midst? Be aware. And HELP them understand what is being said and what spiritual languages are useful for.

1 Corinthians 14:19 But in a church meeting I would rather speak five understandable words to help others than ten thousand words in an unknown language.

1 Corinthians 14:23 If unbelievers or people who don't understand these things come into your church meeting and hear everyone speaking in an unknown language, they will think you are crazy.

1 Corinthians 14:27 No more than two or three should speak in tongues. They must speak one at a time, and someone must interpret what they say. ²⁸ But if no one is present who can interpret, they must be silent in your church meeting and speak in tongues to God privately.

Notice the last phrase of verse 28: *"Speak in tongues to God privately."*

This is the most common, and richest, use of this gift. For when we speak to God in tongues—in prayer or in song—we are speaking to God on HIS level, in a language He understands.

Romans 8:26 And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. ²⁷ And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. ²⁸ And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

We might conclude that praying in tongues is the closest thing to perfect prayer, since it is *"in harmony with God's own will."* For John has concluded that *"we can be confident that [God] will listen to us whenever we ask Him for anything in line with His will"* (1 John 5:14).

Tongues in Prayer

1 Corinthians 14:14 For if I pray in tongues, my spirit is praying, but I don't understand what I am saying. ¹⁵ Well then, what shall I do? I will pray in the spirit, and I will also pray in words I understand. I will sing in the spirit, and I will also sing in words I understand.

Are your prayers problem-centered, or promise-centered? As you pray in tongues the Holy Spirit can shift your attention and thinking from your problems to God's power and promises.

Tongues in Worship

To worship in unknown tongues, whether in speech or in song, builds heart-to-heart communion with God. Expressing wonder, joy, longing, hope, and praise—worship in the Spirit is unfettered.

The personal emotional barriers are down. Psychological filters are turned off. Intellectual and linguistic bottlenecks are removed.

Your heart to God's heart, directly. On His level of communication. In words He understands. For His ears only.

Tongues as a Relationship Builder

Christianity is a relationship more than a religion, at least as Jesus conceived and practiced it. He introduced us to God as Father, and to the Holy Spirit as Friend.

Therefore, the focus of living out our faith should be developing our relationship with God, even before works of kindness, for compassionate charity only matters if it is faith (in Christ), expressing itself in love (God's love).

The development of that relationship is the result of building ourselves up personally (1 Corinthians 14:4) through praying and worshiping in the Spirit.

His Gift, His Way

In closing, let me tell you the story of two friends in another church I served. I had the enormous privilege of leading them to faith in Christ in their middle age. Both wanted to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.

We sat together in my office, as I explained the Father's promise and some of its purpose for our lives. Both were eager for me to pray for them.

As I prayed for Christ's presence to join us, they invited Him to baptize them in His Spirit. In a few moments, they each became aware of His enveloping love and they simply entered in by faith and began speaking in tongues.

But their emotional responses were dramatically different, as yours may be.

She began gently worshiping the Lord in a heavenly language, tears rolling down her cheeks. His body stiffened in his seat, as he worshiped loudly and intensely.

For him it was release. For her it was peace. For him it was confirmation of God's power. For her it was assurance of God's love.

Don't put God in a box of your own preconception. Let Him move you in the way He chooses. As you pray, become aware of His presence and prompting, and then just "go with the flow."

When you let the Holy Spirit choose, the result will last, and be much more satisfying.

Why don't you invite Him to come upon you right here and right now?