

Is Speaking In Tongues a Gift of the Spirit for the Church of all Times?

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I. Speaking in tongues—what is it?

In the Greek (and thus also in the Greek New Testament) the word "tongue" often also means "language." Therefore most Bible expositors understand the speaking of the apostles in "other tongues," which took place on the first Pentecost, as speaking in other languages. That makes sense, since in the account of Pentecost it is expressly stated that the hearers thereby understood the proclamation of the great deeds of God in their mother tongue or native language (Ac 2:8). Contrary to that, the speaking in tongues in Corinth was understood neither by the members of the congregation nor by the guests attending the service, who as yet were not Christians (1 Cor 14:6-9, 27-28).

Opinions diverge, however, in answering the question whether the speaking in tongues in Corinth was a babbling unintelligible syllables and sounds in contrast to the speaking in foreign languages at Pentecost. Many contest that, mostly with two arguments:

1. Then it certainly would be impossible to use the same term for both in the New Testament, and
2. In Corinth it could have dealt with speaking in languages unknown to the hearers. Then also at Pentecost those hearers who considered the apostles as drunk were such to whom the foreign languages being spoken were unknown.

Over against that, others insist the following differences are and remain valid:

1. At Pentecost only a few did not understand (or did not want to understand), whereas in Corinth the speaking in tongues was generally unintelligible. That is why the special gift of the Spirit, the gift of understanding and expounding, was needed, which was not always present (1 Cor 12:30; 14:13, 28). Corinth, however, was a place where people of many different languages came together (a port city)!
2. In the very first year of the church the content of the speaking in tongues was a proclamation praising God, as on Pentecost in Jerusalem. But also the accounts of both other occurrences in the early years of the church at which speaking in tongues turned up, namely, in Caesarea and Ephesus, allow the conclusion that there "*even as at the beginning*" (i.e., on Pentecost: Ac 11:15; cf. 10:46) this speaking in tongues *at the same time* was for the hearers "a praising of God" (Ac 10:46) or "prophesying" (Ac 19:6) which they understood. Over against that, the prophesying (namely, proclaiming with prophetic power; Luther: Revision of

1984, "speaking prophetically") is emphasized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 as more important compared with speaking in tongues and its interpretation.¹

Although these and other arguments against speaking in foreign languages in Corinth are perhaps decisive, we on our part may let this controversial question rest. For our thesis it is not decisive whether a distinction must be made between speaking in foreign languages, or whether in general it was perhaps just a mysterious speaking to which God in those early days added the other miraculous gift that the hearers were able to hear and understand the sounds in other languages known to them. In this case only a few in Corinth would still have possessed this gift.

Our research will confine itself to the decisive question whether speaking in tongues—understood one way or another—is an *abiding* gift for the church and was meant to be that, and thus would be a gift to strive for and to pray for.

II. Speaking in tongues was neither commanded nor promised for all times, nor is it something to strive for.

1. Assignment

Already before his Passion Jesus had promised his disciples the pouring out of the Holy Spirit after his return to the Father (Jn 14:15f,26; 16:7f,12ff). Before his ascension into heaven he reminded them of that and commanded them to remain in Jerusalem to await the imminent fulfillment of this prophecy. This would assure them of their assignment and office as witnesses to the whole world (Ac 1:48). Neither Luke nor John mention that Jesus spoke of the speaking--in-tongues sign. Matthew also only mentions the Lord's great commission, to which he adds the promise of his own presence (Mt 28:20) and the power of the Holy Spirit; the *only commission*, however, is to proclaim the Word entrusted to them, to which the words, "Be baptized and wash away your sins" and "This do" concerning the Lord's Supper also belong. In accordance with that, Mark also reports the parting words of the Lord: "Preach the good news to all creation. Whosoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:15f). Here too is found only the one great assignment, to proclaim and to baptize, through which Christ bestows eternal salvation upon all who accept it in faith, which the Holy Spirit effects precisely through these means of grace. Until the day of judgment there can be nothing more important than these promises which Christ has attached to the treasure the church is commanded to share and distribute.

This is also followed here (Mk 16:17ff) by the prophecy: "And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." Here Jesus also promises speaking in tongues as a sign that will follow, "but does not command that it be practiced."² For this and all miraculous signs no person can perform on command; rather, they "follow" when and where God wills. Therefore Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:11 closes the enumeration of spiritual gifts with these words: "All these are the work of *one* and the same Spirit, and he gives them to *each one*, just as *he determines*."

2. Promise

¹ Cf. J. Mager, *Geistesgaben—Geistesfrucht* (Berlin 1974).

² Luther, St. Louis Edition (*SL*) 15, 2562 g. All italicizing in the quotations is added.

Christ also does not enumerate all signs, nor does he promise that in all ages the same signs will follow. Among us and in our times, when totally different dangers threaten than poisonous snakes and poison cups, Christ certainly has the power to permit totally different signs to follow. Therefore also speaking in tongues does not have to be a sign for all ages, also not a gift of the Spirit for all ages, just as little as inspiration. While the Lord assured his disciples of his presence for all times, "always, to the very end of the age " (Mt 28:20), he has not given the same promise for tongue speaking and other signs.

If speaking in tongues were a permanent gift and a permanent sign, then we would have to expect that somewhere in the New Testament the exhortation would be found to strive prayerfully for this gift. But such an exhortation is found nowhere, not even in the chapters in 1 Corinthians that deal with speaking in tongues. Rather, we find there: "Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But *eagerly desire the greater gifts!*" (12:30f). Thereupon in chapter 13 follows the great love psalm. The 14th chapter consequently begins: "*Follow the way of love!*" But that does not exclude Paul's adding the admonition: "Eagerly desire spiritual gifts," and then he continues, "especially the gift of prophecy! For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men..." In conclusion, however, Paul does not say that thereupon one should concern oneself with speaking in tongues, but only, "But I would rather have you prophesy." But one should not go so far as to forbid speaking in tongues in Corinth (14:39).

III. Speaking in tongues—a supportive sign in the beginning.

1. On Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2)

W.F. Besser calls the pentecostal praising of God in strange languages

...a sign of the Spirit, which at the beginning made the church sure of its purpose. The gospel should be preached to all creation, and all creation should proclaim God's praises...and therewith the harvest has begun, which will not cease until the harvest has been gathered over the entire world....Receiving the prophetic promise of the Father, the recipients of this blessing speak in foreign languages so that the fulfillment of the original promise might come to pass: "Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed" (Gn 22:18).³

The sign confirmed the word that Peter preached in his Pentecost sermon: "The promise is for you and your children and for *all who are far off*, for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Ac 2:39). And many Jews and Jewish converts became certain that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one, was the promised Messiah and Savior of *all nations*.

2. In Caesarea (Acts 10)

How difficult it was at that time for the Jewish Christians, even for the apostles, to put into practice their faith in Jesus as the Savior who had come for all people shows itself here for the first time. It was the first time that Peter had received Gentiles into the Christian fellowship, which up to that time had consisted only of Jewish [and Samaritan] Christians. In older editions

³ *Bibelstunden*, Halle, 1896, Vol 3, pp 76f.

of the Bible this revolutionary event is called to our attention in the heading for the chapter (e.g., in the *Stuttgart Jubilee Bible*) which reads: "Cornelius is received by Peter into the Christian congregation, the first among the Gentiles."

If one does not transpose oneself into the situation prevalent in the Jewish-Christian church of that day, then the tension in this chapter remains something strange. For the Jews, ever since the days of their early ancestors, membership among God's people stood and fell with the rite of circumcision, as God had commanded it to Abraham and his descendants (Gn 17). This was however now set aside with the coming of Christ (Gal 5:6), to which already the speaking in tongues at Pentecost had called attention. Despite this the Jewish Christians resisted—in part very obstinately—the truth that through Christ "the fence" was demolished between Jews and Gentiles, between citizens of the people of God and strangers without citizenship rights (Eph 2:11-19).

Also in Peter this understanding first had to mature. In his case God first had to overcome the dread of entering the home of the Gentile Cornelius by letting a large sheet filled with unclean animals descend before him and then saying to him, "Kill and eat." In his faithfulness to the Old Testament law, Peter three times even countered what God said by saying, "Surely not Lord!...I have never eaten anything impure or unclean" (cf. Lv 11). But three times he received from God the answer not to call anything unclean that God had made clean. In this way he was prepared by God to accept the invitation of Cornelius and to preach the gospel in his home. He began his sermon with a statement embodying the truth he had just now come to know, "that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." Through this sermon it came to pass that Cornelius and his relatives and friends received the Holy Spirit and, speaking in tongues, praised God (Ac 10:9-46).

How necessary this sign was first of all for the Jewish Christians who had entered the home of Cornelius with Peter! Also for them the barrier between the Jews as God's people and the Gentiles, separated from them, seemed insurmountable. Peter could now refer them to the sign God had given and say: "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized? They have received the Holy Spirit *just as we have*"—namely, with the same gift of tongue speaking that we received on Pentecost (v 47). When then a little later in Jerusalem Peter was reproved by the Jewish Christians for having entered the home of non-Jews and having eaten with them, he could in defending himself call their attention to the sign that had been granted in Caesarea even as in Jerusalem "at the beginning" (Ac 11:2f,15). And when the unity of the church of the New Testament was at stake, he once more referred to this miracle, namely, at the so-called Apostolic Council (Ac 15:7f).

3. In Ephesus (Acts 19)

Here Paul, as Acts 19:1ff records, happens upon a few disciples of John the Baptist who neither knew of the Holy Spirit⁴ nor had been baptized with the baptism instituted by Christ, namely, the baptism in the name of the Triune God, but had been baptized with John's baptism.

Here finally follows the incorporation of John's disciples (v 3) into the one church of the New Covenant. The speaking in tongues and the prophesying was an assurance to them of the reception of the Holy Spirit and therewith of the

⁴ Or did not know that he had been poured out on Pentecost—so Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1909), IV, 82f (ed.).

correctness of their complete transition to the New Covenant (cf. Jn 3:30f; He 8:13), as well as being a sign of its worldwide validity. Acts 18:25ff shows how strengthening the working together of Christ's disciples and John's disciples could be - and that a definite sign was necessary for encouraging the complete transitions.⁵

In summary we can say: Early Christianity found itself in a very special time period as far as the history of salvation was concerned, a time such as never was before and also never came again. For with the death and resurrection of Christ God inaugurated the New Covenant, in which there were no more barriers among God's people, whether citizens or guests. This was something incomprehensible for the Old Testament people of God. That is why God added signs to the Word helpful both in *bringing people to faith* and also helpful *for the believers* among the Jews. For those still hoping for a Savior yet to come or for those still clinging to his forerunner, John, this sign was meant to confirm the good news that the Savior of the world *had come*, so that they too would believe in him. For the believing Jewish Christians it was meant as a help to overcome the Old Testament barriers. That, of course, was true as far as all of the signs Jesus had foretold in Mark 16:17f were concerned, and it was now also fulfilled in respect to the speaking in new tongues: "The Lord...confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it" (Mk 16:20).

4. Speaking in tongues—also a sign of judgment

Whereas in the early years of the church speaking in tongues, as we saw, was a sign for the believers and for faith itself, Paul writes something totally different concerning it to the Corinthians, "Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers" (1 Cor 14:22). This statement is usually ignored in Pentecostal churches and in charismatic circles, which G. F. Rendal, who belonged to them, substantiates, saying:

Never had anyone called my attention to this teaching of the Holy Spirit. What was taught in the congregations was...that it was a sign for the believers, that the believers had to seek this sign *for themselves* and that, above all, it was a sign that the believers had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁶

He investigated even farther, as to which unbelievers were meant here (1 Cor 14:22). In so doing, he came upon the word of God in Isaiah 28:11, which Paul had cited as proof (1 Cor 14:21): "Through men of strange tongues and through lips of foreigners I will speak to the people, but even then they will not listen to me." This word of God is for Paul proof for the statement following upon it: "Tongues, then, are a sign...for unbelievers." Rendal correctly concludes that therewith the unbelieving Jews are meant. The threatening declaration in Isaiah 28 after all refers to the Jewish people, to whom God had allowed his Word to be proclaimed. "But they would not listen" (Is 28:12).

Decisive, moreover, is that God in the word quoted by Paul proclaims judgment, and that through "the Assyrians who as a nation with a foreign language carried out the judgment upon Israel after it had scorned the word of the prophets which it understood."⁷ But if a language that

⁵ J. Lange, "Die Theologie Paul Yonggi Chos," in *Bibel and Gemeinde*, 1989, No 1, p 53.

⁶ In *Ich rede mehr als ihr alle in Zungen* (Amtzell/Allgäu, 1985), p 35.

⁷ Mager, *op cit*, p 74.

is *not understood* by them is a judgment, then it could not and would not work faith among the unbelieving people: "...But even then they will not listen to me." It therefore serves only to harden the heart. This fact Paul, moved by the Holy Spirit, applies to tongue speaking, which is a sign of judgment for the unbelieving Jews and as such can also help unbelieving "strangers" to come to faith.

Thus, for example, also Ph. Bachmann states in commenting on this passage: ". . . that here the judgment is not carried out by outward destruction, but in this that those who are perplexed by this new speech on the part of God will also not hear him in it but harden themselves against him, and that he likewise hides himself from them. Speaking in tongues is thus a means to elicit a final and decisive rejection of God. The passage (Isaiah 28), whose fulfillment in Israel Paul does not deny by a single syllable, now carries out its purpose in its own way in the present Christian church."⁸ This Paul then proves by pointing to the effects of tongue speaking on the guests in the worship service in Corinth (1 Cor 14:23).

But is not all that a disavowal of what we determined in the former portion of this thesis, namely, that speaking in tongues was a sign for the believers and an aid to faith? Not at all! For just as one and the same Word of God given for salvation in the case of stiff-necked rejection can work hardening of heart, so that can also happen in the case of a sign. After all, Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 does not speak about what the sign actually was given for in the first place, but rather what its purpose is now. For in the meantime the gospel had spread out in the surrounding Gentile nations as far as Europe. Congregations had been established, composed of Jews and Gentiles. Christians in various lands praised God in their own languages for their salvation and spread the joyous news in their own languages. Now speaking in tongues as a sign was no longer necessary as something given to move God's Old Testament people to become part of the universal, worldwide church of the New Testament. The gospel proclaimed in many languages was indeed a much greater sign! But, despite that, even then a large portion of the Jews hardened themselves against the gospel. Thus the speaking-in-tongues sign became a sign "for the unbelieving"! And that does not simply mean "to bring them to faith," but "to harden them in their unbelief"

5. The gradual fading away of speaking in tongues in Corinth

God's will, however, was not to harden all of unbelieving Israel forever (cf. Ro 11:23,30f). Still less was it his intention, as a matter of course, to harden the Gentiles, who had not as yet heard his Word in law and gospel. He rather "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm 2:4). That is why Paul now seeks to tone down speaking in tongues in Corinth and lays all emphasis on prophesying (1 Cor 14:22-25). "Prophecy, however, (serves as a sign) for believers (and for faith), not for unbelievers (and for unbelief)...But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all"(the prophesying and its deep insight)...and so he will (finally) fall down and worship God..."⁹

But not only because of his love for missions [gaining converts] does Paul seek to curb speaking in tongues. The Corinthians were not to think that they could after all exercise the speaking in tongues among themselves when no non-Christians were visiting the service. That is

⁸ In *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, Zahn Commentary, 3rd edition, 1921, p 420; similarly also: Schnedermann (Strack-Zöckler Commentary), Wendland (NTD), C. M. Zorn, and others.

⁹ Bachmann, *op cit*, p 421; what here is in parentheses is also in parentheses in the original.

why he not only tells them that the unbelieving are not helped to believe by the speaking in tongues, but also that the congregation is not served thereby either. Why? Because it cannot be understood, be it because it is only a babbling in non-understandable sounds or be it that the gift to understand these foreign languages is now given to only a few (1 Cor 14:1-6). That is why only preaching, not speaking in tongues, can serve to exhort and comfort and thus edify the congregation (1 Cor 14:2f).

Therefore, speaking in tongues—both as a sign and as a gift of the Spirit in itself—had lost its intrinsic purpose. Already in chapter 12 Paul mentions the purpose which all gifts of the Spirit should serve according to God's will: "for the common good" (for the good of all) (12:7). He supports this truth in 12:12ff with the illustration of the organs and limbs of the body, which all in some way or another serve the whole body. Speaking in tongues, therefore, even if someone is present who can understand and interpret them, is to be employed in a service only in a limited way (1 Cor 14:27). Otherwise it would serve only for self-edification (14:4).

The apostle, to be sure, does not want to forbid this to those who still possess this gift. But he does state very clearly: The one "who cultivates this gift above all others, and does not prayerfully strive for more worthwhile gifts, with which he can serve others, he is missing the greatest gift: love" (see above under II,2). Even if he then speaks with the tongues of angels, he would only be "a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1). So Paul quite openly advocates a curtailing of the use of this gift and thus prepares for its extinction. In no other New Testament letters is it even referred to, not even where a large number of other gifts are enumerated (Ro12:3-8).

6. The passing away of the gift of speaking in tongues

The gift of speaking in tongues actually disappeared after the apostolic age. At the time of the church father Augustine (354-430) it had already for a long time belonged to the distant past. In his *Homily on 1 John* he wrote:

These were gifts applicable to their era. They served the purpose of announcing to men of all languages the coming of the Holy Spirit, to show that God's gospel would have to be preached in all languages of the world. This sign took place in order to announce something, and *then it disappeared*.¹⁰

And that is the way it remained.

Luther also expressed himself in the same way as Augustine did:

And it was necessary that immediately at the birth of the church the Holy Spirit was given by means of a clear sign and a great miracle, since so many things in the law had been set aside, and so many innovations had to be introduced in the whole world, so that it would be believed that this matter was being carried out not by human, but by divine authority. Now that this new way has found confirmation and that the gospel is the very same that it was at that time, and no new innovations will be introduced before the Judgment, that first visible

¹⁰ Cited according to Randal, *op cit*, p 81.

revelation of the Spirit is fully sufficient, and it is one that is of lasting value for all times, not something still needed.¹¹

Writing on Joel 3:17, Luther states: "Now that the gospel has been revealed and proclaimed by the apostles to all ends of the world...*these signs immediately ceased*....Therefore we should no longer demand signs to corroborate the word, which already previously was so clearly confirmed and stands before the world for all to see."¹² "After the faith and the church had been established in all the world, *the signs ceased*. And then the last times followed, in which the Antichrist has performed miracles, although they are false and lying wonders to mislead the unbelieving, as Paul says 2 Thessalonians 2:9ff.¹³

Why then should Christians today strive to speak in tongues accomplished by means of the laying on of hands in a so-called "Spirit baptism," which after all was not commanded to the church by Christ, and therefore is a human invention? Why should they according to the teaching of certain charismatics acquire speaking in tongues, which in itself stands in opposition to a freely given gift of the Spirit? There is no support for it. For:

1. It is no longer needed as a sign that Christ is not only the Savior of the Jews. "Now, that the church consists of people of all nations, the question concerning the universality of the church is no longer being raised....For many centuries no one has had to be persuaded any longer that salvation is also there for people of other languages, e.g., for the Swiss, the French, the English, the Chinese, the Zulus, etc...."¹⁴
2. God himself in his great mercy permitted speaking in tongues to be a sign of judgment against the foes of the gospel among the former people of God only for a short time. For that we ought to thank him. How dare we take a stand against God's mercy by insisting on a speaking in tongues, achieved convulsively, a speaking in tongues which only serves to harden hearts?
3. Or do we thereby want unconditionally to document our lovelessness, that we, contrary to the admonition of the Apostle Paul, strive for a gift which now serves only self-edification, but does not serve the neighbor or the congregation?
4. No miraculous signs have been promised by Christ and his apostles for these last times. Lying wonders performed through the power of the devil are, however, foretold (Mt 24:2; 2 Th 2:9; Re 16:14;19:20). We cannot fight against these with the same and similar signs, but only with the infallible Word of God, which is more powerful than all.

¹¹ SL 15, 2565.

¹² SL 6, 1455f; cf. 6, 1672, where Luther, speaking similarly, adds, "We have no other revelation of the Holy Spirit than the one in Scripture."

¹³ SL 7,335; cf: also 13b,2568.

¹⁴ Rendal, *op cit*, p 79.