

Does The Experience of Speaking In Tongues Agree With The Truth of Scripture?

A Biblical Answer To a Contemporary Question
by David E. Moss

A certain segment of Christianity preaches that there is a necessary *experience* after salvation if a Christian wants to have all that God has prepared for him. According to them, the gospel consists of something more than being born again by faith in Jesus Christ, for they claim to preach the “full gospel.”

One of the primary manifestations of this post-conversion experience, they say, is speaking in tongues. Some go so far as to say that tongues speaking is the evidence that a person has received the Holy Spirit. Others do not insist on this extreme view, but still consider speaking in tongues to be an appropriate manifestation of the work of the Spirit within the life of a Christian.

There is a strong division over this matter of tongues, because another segment of Christianity believes the legitimate use of tongues, as a spiritual gift, terminated with the age of the Apostles. Thus, to speak or not to speak, for some, becomes a puzzling question. For others, there is no doubt that all modern tongues speaking is unbiblical. At the heart of the issue is the basis upon which we determine the validity of an activity.

The Power Of God

One of the standard criticisms of those of us who do not believe in the use of tongues for today is that we deny or, at least, question the power of God to perform miracles. If God wants someone to speak in tongues (or, for that matter, perform some other miracle), who are we to say that God cannot do so? The truth is we do not say God “cannot.” We say He “does not”; and there is a significant difference between these two things.

We acknowledge that God has unlimited power to do whatever He wishes. We acknowledge the truthfulness of all the miracles recorded in the word of God. He created everything out of nothing. He parted the waters of the sea, healed the sick, and brought the dead back to life. We also acknowledge that occasionally, God does some things today which seem pretty miraculous. God is indeed quite capable of performing any miracle He chooses to perform and we are happy to acknowledge this truth.

What we do not acknowledge is that God chooses to perform miracles through human agents today. The miraculous spiritual gifts were withdrawn from the Church a long time ago. The operative word is “choose,” not “ability.” God is able to do anything, but He does not always choose to do what He is able to do.

History demonstrates that God has chosen to perform miracles through human agents only at select times. Moses, Elijah and the Disciples all were used to perform miracles. But Adam, Abraham and Jeremiah were not. Consider Abraham. He is called the father of all those who exercise faith in God. He was the beneficiary of a miraculous birth for his son Isaac, but he himself never performed one miracle. Why would a man of such great faith not be given the ability to perform miracles? It certainly would have been advantageous in some of the circumstances he faced. The fact is God simply did not choose to perform miracles through Abraham. He performed one (and only one) for Abraham, but none through him.

Today, God may occasionally perform some miraculous things for individuals, but he does not choose to use men as the means by which they are done.

The Experience of Man

One of the hardest things to refute, however, is a person's experience. People really do speak in tongues. They experience this phenomenon in situations where they are invoking the name of God and are "worshipping" Him. So how can anyone say it is not real when it is actually happening?

We do not question that it is real, but we do question that it is right. Just attaching the name of Christ to an activity does not make it right. Jesus himself testified that some people would perform real miracles in His name but He would not recognize such things as valid (Matthew 7:21-23). Just because a person has experienced something does not mean it is legitimate.

Experience can never be the gauge by which activities may be measured correctly. This would be like using a student's own test answers to grade his test. He would always score 100% because he would always agree with himself. Similarly, there has to be a higher standard than our experience to determine the value of life's activities. In fact, there is. The standard is the truth recorded in the Word of God. If anything we experience does not agree with Scripture, then something is wrong with our experience, not with the Bible.

The Truth of the Word

God's Word has some very specific things to say about the tenure of tongues as a spiritual gift, the most important of which is in I Corinthians 13.

8. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

9. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

10. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

11. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

12. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then fact to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Verse 8

By saying that Charity never fails, God specifies that Agape love never comes to an end. There is never a time when it ceases, so that a husband or wife ought never to say "I don't love you anymore." If you have covenanted together a pledge of divine love, that is something which has no ending point.

To illustrate this, God chooses to contrast unending love with things that do have an ending point: three spiritual gifts -- prophecies, tongues, and knowledge.

Verse 10

God qualified the ending point of these spiritual gifts as the moment when "that which is perfect is come." This then is the key statement regarding the tenure of tongues, and other spiritual gifts specifically designed to communicate direct revelation from God.

Verse 9

Each of these spiritual gifts provided New Testament Truth to the infant Church. They needed the same revelation that we need today. We have the whole New Testament in print, they did not. In fact, some of the New Testament had not even been written yet. So gifts of knowledge and prophecy, in particular, and tongues in a less direct way, provided these truths

to local congregations for their edification. The limitation of these gifts was that they could only provide small parts of the New Testament at any given time. This left the first century believers with the privilege of hearing parts of the New Testament, but without the means of reviewing all Scriptural truth at will. The word "part" is significant to understanding this passage.

Verse 10

The word "but" indicates that verse 10 is intended to stand in contrast to verse 9. Verse 9 speaks of that which is in "part." Verse 10 speaks of that which is "perfect." Thus "part" and "perfect" are opposites. The word part we can understand. It is something that is incomplete. The word perfect, as it is used in Scripture, can sometimes create confusion. But in these verses its meaning is clear. As the opposite of something that is incomplete, it represents something that is complete.

If verse 9 is talking about spiritual gifts that communicate parts of the New Testament, or parts of the Word of God, then verse 10 is talking about the completed Word of God. Thus when the Word of God is completed, by the writing down of all the New Testament, then the spiritual gifts which communicate parts of the Word of God will be done away. Who needs pieces when you can have the whole thing.

Verse 11

For further clarification, two illustrations are given. The first in verse 11, compares the spiritual gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge with childish ways of speaking, understanding and thinking. The connection is obvious -- children lack the information they need to function on a mature level. Their knowledge is partial and incomplete. Once a person's education and development are complete, he can lay aside the insufficient tools of childhood and conduct himself like a mature adult.

This illustrates what is to take place when the Word of God is complete and available to the Church in written form. The spiritual gifts which conveyed parts of the Word orally would be discontinued. They were tools of an infant church that would no longer be needed. All the truth they needed would be provided in the form of Scripture.

Verse 12

The second illustration in verse 12, speaks of looking at one self in a mirror. The mirrors used in the first century were not crystal clear as the ones we use today. When one peered at himself in a mirror, he could see only an incomplete reflection of himself. So it was that by hearing revelation through those who prophesied, spoke words of knowledge, or communicated truth by means of speaking in tongues in conjunction with an interpreter, a Christian could have only an incomplete understanding of truth. (Now I know in part.)

"But **then** shall I know even as also I am known." When? When that which is perfect is come. When the Word of God is complete, I will be able to see the whole truth and understand how all its parts fit together in the same way that another person can look directly at me and see exactly what I look like.

What this passage is not saying.

There are many well meaning Bible students who interpret this passage to say that "that which is perfect is come" is referring to the return of Christ, because He is the perfect one. When He returns, they say, my understanding will be opened up so that I will never again have to walk about in the fog of an imperfect mirror.

If this is so, then tongues would certainly be for today. However, nothing about this word “perfect” suggests such an interpretation. The context as we have shown leads to a different conclusion. The meaning of the word does suggest a reference to Christ. And, the gender of the word is neuter, concerning which Christ is never in any other place in Scripture referred to with a neuter term.

This passage is definitely not a reference to the return of Christ, nor to the effect it will have on the understanding of a believer.

Conclusion

There are other reasons to believe that tongues are not for today. (1) It had a very specific purpose as a sign to unbelieving Jews that this new revelation was truly the Word of God (I Corinthians 14:22). Thus tongues had no intrinsic value to the church other than as a tool of evangelism. (2) When Scripture says that a person who speaks in tongues edifies himself, this is a criticism not a compliment (I Corinthians 14:2-4). It in no way suggests that tongues were to be used in private devotions, because the context of these verses is public worship. Those who spoke in tongues were not to do so without an interpreter present, because everything in a worship service is to be directed toward edifying the group, and directed away from a performance that benefited an individual.

The crucial issue, though, in the debate over tongues involves the closure of divine revelation for our age. Does Scripture represent the entirety of truth for our age? Or, is God still communicating parts of truth through spiritual gifts such as prophecy, tongues and knowledge?

To believe that tongues are for today is to believe that the Bible is incomplete and therefore insufficient. It is to believe that we need more than the Bible to know God and to serve Him adequately.

To believe that the Bible is the complete body of truth God intends to provide for us in this age, requires that any means by which additional revelation is communicated be rendered invalid. Regardless of what man experiences, truth always takes precedence. If what man is doing does not agree with what God has said, then it is not difficult to figure out which one is wrong.

The disagreement over the use of tongues goes far beyond a mere denominational distinctive. It is a matter of grave doctrinal difference. It is serious enough to believe that those who deny the completion of revelation and participate in pseudo spiritual gifts, which purport to communicate extra-biblical truth, are guilty of disorderly conduct and should be excluded from the fellowship of obedient believers according to I Thessalonians 3:6-9, and 14-15. Among them may be genuine believers who should be caused to question the validity of their practices by our unwillingness to fellowship with them. To treat them as obedient brethren, only just a little different than we are, would be to encourage them in their error.

There is, of course, a serious side effect of the charismatic phenomenon, as it is called. It has the potential to convince some who follow it that their salvation is based on something other than believing in the work of Christ and receiving Him as their salvation.

The death burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the full gospel. When a person understands that he is a lost sinner and receives the gospel by faith, he is redeemed, forgiven, justified, sanctified and indwelt by the Holy Spirit all in a single moment. At the very moment of salvation, a person gets everything God has promised. As we learn more and more of the truth we learn how to appropriate all that we possess in Christ.

Never let your experience lead you into an activity which contradicts the truth. And,

never let another person's experience confuse you about what the Scripture says in very precise terms.