

## Speaking in Tongues in the Book of Acts and Beyond

To the matter of speaking in tongues. I will walk through a number of different things about speaking in tongues and hopefully address all of your questions. If not, or if my comments generate additional questions, please feel free to reach out.

We will start in the beginning.

The first place in the New Testament where we see people speaking in tongues is in Acts chapter 2: 2:1 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. <sup>5</sup> Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. <sup>7</sup> And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, <sup>11</sup> both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” (Acts 2:1-11, ESV).

It seems from the context that these Jews were somehow given the ability to speak in languages that they did not know, but that others recognized as real, legitimate languages and they understood what was being said.

The sheer scope and complexity of this miracle is mind boggling. It happened at Pentecost, likely to the 120 who had travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem and were waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit as Christ has directed them to do.

I would argue that this miracle was proof that the door of gospel had been opened to the Jews, and it was evidenced by this amazing miracle of tongues. By the way we will see many groups of Jewish people continue to come to faith in Jesus, but none of them will be evidenced, as part of the salvation experience, with the gift of tongues.

This brings us to the next time we believe we find tongues, it is again in the book of Acts, this time it is in Acts chapter 8:

This is a really interesting event and highlights a couple things that we will discuss in a second. To set the backdrop, persecution had broken out in Jerusalem and many were scattered and as they fled they preached the gospel. Then we read:

<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. <sup>6</sup> And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. <sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was much joy in that city. <sup>9</sup> But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. <sup>10</sup> They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great.” <sup>11</sup> And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. <sup>12</sup> But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. <sup>13</sup> Even Simon himself believed, and

after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. <sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, <sup>15</sup> who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." <sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. (Acts 8:4-22, ESV).

OK, so the Deacon Phillip went to Samaria and preached the gospel and God provided signs through him and many people gave their lives to Christ. You can see that many professed Christ and were baptized (8:12). The apostles learned about what was happening in Samaria and they sent Peter and John to check it out. Upon their arrival they determined that the Spirit had not fallen on any of these Samaritan believers, so they prayed that they might receive the Spirit and the new believers there in Samaria were given the Holy Spirit and the event was so amazing that Simon the magician offered the apostles money to do what they did. Although we are not sure what Simon saw, most scholars believe that he saw the giving of the Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues.

Here we see the spirit poured out on Samaritans, and similar to what had happened with the Jews they (likely) spoke in tongues. It is important to note that we will see other Samaritans place faith in Jesus Christ, but never again will we see tongues as part of the experience, only with this very first group.

But there is another question, why did it take Peter and John going to Samaria for that to happen. We do not know why, but I believe we may have a hint in what Jesus told Peter in Matthew 16:

<sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Mat 16:19, ESV).

Peter and likely the other apostles had the keys to open the gospel to each people group. That is possibly why Phillip's preaching did not bring about the Samaritans speaking in tongues. Because the door to the Samaritans had not yet been opened by an apostle. So when the gospel was opened to a new people group for the first time, people in that group spoke in tongues, providing evidence that the door had been opened to that group. Once the door was opened to that group we never see the miracle of tongues happen with people from that group, as part of their salvation experience. With these things tucked away in the back of our mind we will now move to the third time we see the miracle of tongues in the book of Acts.

I will cut to the chase; Peter has been directed by the Holy Spirit and he is now at a Gentile Roman centurion's house named Cornelius. Peter along with other Jewish believers traveled to Caesarea where Cornelius lived and we read this:

<sup>4</sup> And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. <sup>25</sup> When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. <sup>26</sup> But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." <sup>27</sup> And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. <sup>28</sup> And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. <sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me." <sup>30</sup> And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour,<sup>[d]</sup> and behold, a man stood before me in bright

clothing <sup>31</sup> and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. <sup>32</sup> Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ <sup>33</sup> So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.” <sup>34</sup> So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup> As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), <sup>37</sup> you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: <sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup> And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, <sup>40</sup> but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, <sup>41</sup> not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup> And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup> To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” <sup>44</sup> While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. <sup>45</sup> And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. <sup>46</sup> For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, <sup>47</sup> “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” <sup>48</sup> And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. (Acts 10:4-48).

Now a few observations are important at this point, first the evidence that God had poured out His Spirit on the Jews happens again, but this time it is to a handful of Gentiles and as evidence that God is behind all this, as part of their salvation experience, they speak in tongues.

By the way the apostle Peter is the one who opened the door and the Gentiles spoke in tongues as evidence of their salvation experience. This point will come back around in our lesson on Acts 15 this Sunday. By the way here in the book of Acts we will see tons of Gentiles come to faith in Jesus Christ, but none of the events will accompany the miracle of tongues, only the first time, and never again as part of the salvation experience and we notice that an apostle (in this case Peter) was present.

We see one more time where people speak in tongues in the book of Acts, this time it is in Acts 19 and it is a very unique group and there we read:

**19:1** And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” <sup>3</sup> And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John's baptism.” <sup>4</sup> And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all.

Here we run into Jews who were baptized by John into a baptism of repentance, but it appears they had never heard about the one who was coming after John, Jesus. These were Jews in a very strange place. Then Paul likely preached the gospel to them and they were baptized in the name of Jesus, Paul laid his hands on them and Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues.

Of the many instances of people and groups getting saved in Acts only four groups spoke in tongues, as part of their salvation experience, and it was the first time each of those groups encountered the gospel, and in all cases an apostle was present.

People Group	Where Recorded	Apostle(s) Present
Jews	Acts 2	All 12
Samaritans	Acts 8	Peter and John
Gentiles	Acts 10	Peter
Baptized by John, but had not heard about Jesus	Acts 19	Paul

## Speaking in Tongues, Beyond the Book of Acts

So that was a quick primer on the four times people spoke in tongues in the book of Acts and in all four cases it involved their salvation experience, they represented the first time a unique people group came to salvation, and one or more apostles were present.

But the New Testament has much more to say on the matter and so let's start working our way through it.

First, it is noteworthy that when Paul was saved there is no indication that he spoke in tongues, let's review the account. First a little backstory, Paul was consenting to the death of Stephen the Deacon and had then launched a massive assault on the New Testament church. In Acts chapter 9 we read:

**9:1** But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. <sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." <sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." <sup>17</sup> So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; <sup>19</sup> and taking food, he was strengthened. (Acts 9:1-19, ESV).

So, it does not appear that Paul spoke in tongues as part of his salvation experience, but we know for sure he spoke in tongues and we know for sure he did it more than once. In the chapter that contains the most information about speaking in tongues, (I Corinthians 14) Paul tells his audience in Corinth:

<sup>18</sup> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ( ICor 14:18, ESV).

This tells us a couple of important points:

- 1) Speaking in tongues obviously happened outside the salvation experience.
- 2) It could clearly happen to a person more than once.

In fact, reviewing the New Testament indicates that speaking in tongues is also a Spiritual Gift. It is listed in the spiritual gifts list in I Corinthians 12:7-10 and in I Corinthians 12:28.

Let's look at I Corinthians 12:4-11:

<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup> and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup> and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. <sup>7</sup> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. <sup>8</sup> For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup> to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup> to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. <sup>11</sup> All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (I Cor 12:4-11).

Clearly in context, some get this gift while others get that gift, one of the gifts mentioned is "various kinds of tongues." Secondly, notice that the Spirit apportions to each believer individually as He wills. So, when Paul wrote this, believers were likely given a unique blend of spiritual gifts, as God saw fit, all for His glory. Although some spoke in tongues; we can imagine that many did not.

Let's look at I Corinthians 12:27-31 for it echoes the same points:

**"27 ¶ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way."** (1Co 12:27-31 ESV)

All do not have all spiritual gifts, which means all (when Paul was writing I Corinthians) did not speak in tongues, but all had spiritual gifts, likely a unique blend of gifts. This is very instructive for it reminds us that the spiritual gifts we possess are selected by God for us and we are called to put them to use for His glory and the expansion of His kingdom.

The pressing question that likely remains: **Is the gift of tongues still operative today?**

I do not know of a single verse that indicates it is not operative or that it has been suspended or set aside.

So, although I have never spoke in tongues, I must conclude the gift is still operative. Now this does not mean that everyone who claims to possess the gift actually possesses it, but it does mean that, as best I can tell from the Scriptures, it is still a gift the Holy Spirit gives to some believers.

Now some believe that we are told it has been set aside in I Cor 13, so let's look at that text:



<sup>8</sup> Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. (I Cor 13:8-12, ESV).

There it is Paul says a day is coming when prophecy and tongues will cease. Notice he also includes knowledge will also pass away. For now, we know, but only in part, that partial knowledge will all one day cease. Then we are told this will happen, “*when the perfect comes.*” Some believe this is the formation of the New Testament canon, but that makes no sense, and does not fit the context. Rather it seems when the perfect comes is a reference to our glorification, it seems to be referring to the final state of believers in heaven, then and only then is prophecy, tongues, and partial knowledge all put away.

Now there are guidelines surrounding the gift of speaking in tongues and those are my next focus.

### **Guideline Surrounding the Gift of Tongues**

First, according to Paul speaking in tongues is not the priority, nor is it the greatest gift:

**14:1** Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. <sup>2</sup> For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. <sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. <sup>4</sup> The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. <sup>5</sup> Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. (I Cor 14:1-5, ESV).

Just some points worth restating, our grandest pursuit should be love and the spiritual gift we should desire is to prophesy. The reason that prophesy is desired over tongues is obvious. When a person speaks in an unknown tongue, unless there is an interpreter, no one can understand what is stated. So, unless a person speaks in a language you know, they cannot be understood. While the one who prophesies speaks and is able to be understood and thus can build them up and encourage the listeners. Equally, the one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, while the one who prophesies edifies others.

In I Corinthians 13, Paul reminds us of the supremacy of love:

**13:1** If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (I Cor 13:1-3, ESV).

Second, according to Paul in the church there are clear guidelines around tongues:

<sup>27</sup> If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. <sup>28</sup> But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. <sup>29</sup> Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. <sup>30</sup> If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. <sup>31</sup> For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, <sup>32</sup> and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. <sup>33</sup> For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. (I Cor 12:27-32, ESV).

This is crystal clear, in the church setting one, two, or at the most three people can speak in a tongue, and it must proceed in turn (one-by-one), and there must be an interpreter, if there is not interpreter, then the person is commanded to keep silent and to speak to himself and to God, while on the other hand, all can prophesy (thus says the Lord).

More could be said, but I believe this hits the key issues. If there are nay questions that remain unanswered or you fell like something I said is wrong or need to be clarified, please reach out.