

Exploring the Subject of Speaking in Tongues (Glossolalia) and the Holy Spirit

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Abstract

The subject of speaking in tongues in religious institutions continues to be a debatable one amongst scholars. While other denominations embrace glossolalia, others firmly dispute the usage of tongues. This paper brings biblical insights in analyzing the usage of tongues and tries to correct some misconceptions in relation to tongues. It surmises that tongues usage is still relevant and it is a gift given by God for the benefit of the Church. He gives the gift as He determines through the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: Tongues, the Holy Spirit, Bible, Gift.

Introduction

Differences have always been widespread in religious bodies throughout history on how God should be worshipped. Belief systems greatly vary, but the general credence amongst scholars is that there is a God in heaven and He stands in solitude to Himself (Jones, 2018). Most debates are not necessarily disputing the existence of God or higher power, but rather diverge on how He should be revered. There are also different viewpoints on how the Church should conduct itself in service to God. The issue of speaking in tongues is one aspects where differences are rife. The existence of tongues and usage thereof is validated

by the Bible. Tongues are more prevalent amongst the Pentecostals and the Charismatic Churches (Thompson, 2019). While a number of other religions practice Glossolalia, others do not practice the gift (Central Christian Church, 2022). It is very difficult to draw a line on the exact point when tongues began to be used (Strauss, 1997). However, the first explicit account chronicled in the Bible concerning speaking in tongues is recorded in the Book of Acts 2. This was during the day of Pentecost where clearly the Holy Spirit was manifest and people began speaking in tongues. The Pentecost phenomenon is discussed further on in this paper.

Rutta (2020) argues that the interpretation of what tongues are, have been misunderstood by many and thus used in a context which is not accurate. He asserts that the lack of the real knowledge of what tongues are leads to professing Christians doing disruptive things in church and confusing new believers. This leads to a very shallow Christianity. Rutta might have some sense in his argument about the confusion that might be experienced by new believers. This paper argues that this confusion can be ratified through teaching saints about the Holy Spirit, what tongues are and when they can be used. It argues that tongues are a gift from God given to His people to use even at present day. The purpose of this paper is to try to describe what tongues are, their benefits and the enabling environment for tongues. Being filled with the Holy Spirit which often times leads to Glossolalia is also discussed in this paper. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives gifts and they vary. Others receive the gift of prophecy, miraculous powers, distinguishing between spirits, gifts of healing, gift of speaking in tongues and to others the gift of interpreting tongues. The Bible concludes that all these gifts are from God and are distributed by the Holy Spirit as He determines (1 Corinthians 12: 4-11).

What does it mean to speak in tongues?

Tongues are spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit to believers (1 Corinthians 12:28-30). Therefore tongues are a language of the Spirit which can be spoken by those who receive it. Speaking in tongues is called “glossolalia”. This is derived from the Greek words ‘*glossa*’ meaning ‘tongue’ and ‘*laleo*’ meaning ‘talking’. Speaking in tongues is sometimes referred to as the ‘Charismatic Renewal’ drawn from the term “Charisma” which is a gift of God’s grace (Lowe, 2010). They are not learnt from reading any book, but given by God’s grace. In 1 Corinthians 12 cited above, several questions are observed. The writer of the text asks questions like; are all believers Apostles? Are all believers Prophets? Are all believers workers of miracles? Do all believers speak in tongues? The simple answer would be probably not. The Holy Spirit gives these different gifts to different people as He determines.

Drawing from these questions asked in this scripture, the general conclusion is that not all believers speak in tongues. Jesus in the book of Mark, conveyed the element of belief. He said that “*And these are the signs that 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 bare hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them; when they place their hands on sick people, they will get healed*” (Mark 16:17-18). This proposes that if one has faith in God, he is qualified to speak in tongues, when the Spirit is given. The belief or faith of believers vary in most cases. Some believers can lay hands on the sick and they will get healed. Others would practice the same and no healing will be attained because of lack of faith. Any believer can lay hands on the sick and they can get healed in the name of Jesus if they believe. Anything is possible if you believe. The Bible says that His people must make their requests known unto the Lord (Philippians 4:6). This suggests that if one desires the gift of tongues, one can simply ask and tongues can be given through faith if the Spirit determines.

Tongues are a language given to believers so they can speak to God. Therefore anyone who speaks in tongues is not speaking unto man, but solely to God and no one understands them. They utter mysteries by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:2). This passage of scripture advocates that tongues are a language that is not understood by man. God can deliver a message through a believer in church through tongues. Such a message has to be interpreted. Which is the very reason why God gives the gift of interpretation of tongues to others (1 Corinthians 12:10). Tongues generally edify the person who speaks and not the church (1 Corinthians 14:4). Nonetheless when God delivers a message in tongues and such a message is interpreted, then the church can be edified. Generally what strengthens and edifies the church is prophecy which is telling people what God is saying concerning their lives or the church at large (1 Corinthians 14:3). As observed in Corinthians 14:2 tongues are a language that is not understood by man. Nonetheless, tongues can correspondingly be a language that is understood by man. It means it can be a language which is spoken in a certain tribe or country. In such a case, the language would be spoken by a person who does not know or understand that particular language. Such a phenomenon was observed in the day of Pentecost.

The Bible in the book of Acts 2, reveals that when the day of Pentecost came, a sound like blowing violent wind came from heaven and filled the place where they were gathered. The people saw what appeared to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. They were all suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them (Acts 2:1-4). The New International Version of the Bible uses the word '*other*' tongues. The word '*other*' in this context proposes that this was potentially a different language other than their native language. But it was a

language that was known to other people at the time. The Bible confirms this annotation because it says that the people who came to see what was happening heard the people who were Galileans speaking in other native languages understood by the different people who came (Acts 2:7-8).

The Bible in the book of Acts does not generalize and say that they spoke in tongues, but rather explicate that they spoke in other tongues. Could these be different tongues from the ones spoken about in 1 Corinthians 14, of which scripture says no one can understand and they utter mysteries by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:2). The book of Mark 16:17-18 uses *new tongues*, while in Acts *other tongues* is mentioned. There appears to be a distinction between ‘*new*’ and ‘*other*’. The “*new tongues*’ could be tongues which are not known to man. Of which Paul says are a language of Angels (1 Corinthians 13:10), of which 1 Corinthians 14:2 refers to as not understood by any man. On the other hand ‘*other tongues*’ could be construed as tongues which are native to certain tribes and known by other people. The people speaking them may not understand what they are saying, but are a language that exists.

Strauss (1997) also posits that the people during the day of Pentecost were speaking in known languages other than the native language to them. This was substantiated by the revealing of the languages as documented in Acts 2:9. The people who spoke didn’t know the languages they were speaking. It was a supernatural occurrence which surprised all who came to observe. This paper argues that the tongues spoken in Acts 2, bear different attributes to the ones which are unknown. It means that tongues can either be a language that is native to a certain tribe or country, but also tongues can be a language that is not known by any man, but only known by God. Consequently when such a language is spoken, it is not directed to man, but rather to God. Nevertheless there can be a need for

the glossolalia to be interpreted particularly if God is delivering a message to the church (1 Corinthians 14:13).

An article by the International Bible Teaching Ministry (2022) contends that the gift of tongues was given to the Apostles and also those on whom the Apostles laid hands. This article surmises that the Apostles died and thus the gift cannot be transferred to anyone else anymore. It asserts that the gift died with them (Apostles). The shortfall with this analysis is that it is limiting God's capabilities to time and specific people. This assertion has the potential to reduce God to timeframe and season. Consequently, this paper views such a conclusion somehow shallow analysis of God's preeminence. Surely God is from everlasting to everlasting and His promises are yes and amen (1 Corinthians 1:20). His gifts are not limited to certain kind of people, but He gives His gifts as He determines. Clearly, there is nothing bigger than the Lord (Jeremiah 32:27). To suggest that the gift of tongues ended, will also one way or another conclude that all the other gifts have a time limit. This cannot be the correct stance. This paper argues that God can still give the gift of tongues just like any other gift even on the present day as He determines. If the Holy Spirit is still present, it means the Spirit is still capable to distribute any gift. While acknowledging the spirit-induced language, it should be noted that some tongues can be induced by self, group or even the devil himself. Not all tongues are genuine gifts from God (Strauss, 1997).

Tongues in the Old Testament

While tongues were not clearly documented in the Old Testament, there the existence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament cannot be disputed. He might have appeared to some for short periods, but was not permanently given. The absence of tongues in the Old Testament could potentially be as a result of the Holy Spirit not yet given, because Christ

was not yet glorified (John 7:39). Glorification of Christ was the final removal of sin from the life of the saints through the death and the resurrection (Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 4:17). Glorification was eminent at crucifixion because Christ's death revealed the glorious character of God (John 13:31-32). Other scholars advocate that the Holy Spirit was not sent to indwell people because it was not yet possible to be born again through Christ (Conley, 2011). Clearly one cannot conclude that tongues were not present in the Old Testament. Nevertheless the glorification and the giving of the Holy Spirit propose that tongues were not yet largely practiced if any.

The Holy Spirit is viewed as the catalyst that presents the gift of tongues. Subsequently because the Holy Spirit was not yet given, the gift of tongues was probably not yet revealed. However the Holy Spirit was present even from the beginning. He hovered over the formless void of creation as observed in Genesis 1:2 and also was involved in the creation (Gen 1:26, Job 334). The Holy Spirit functioned differently prior to the day of Pentecost. In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit came temporarily on some individuals, but it was only for a certain period (Numbers 11:24-27). The people who experienced Him acted in strange ways or acts requiring wisdom and they uttered a prophetic word (Ireoba, 2020). When He was given He became permanent for the benefit of the saints (Acts 2:16-21).

Some scholars suggest a link between the Old Testament ecstasy and the New Testament tongues. Others argue that in the Old Testament, prophecy and other gifts were observed and such prophecies were not directly referred to as tongues (Groningen, 1965:1). Although some scholars see a relationship between the Old Testament ecstasy and tongues, still others dispute any relationship between the two. Therefore there appears to be no conclusive agreement on the subject.

Being filled with the Holy Ghost

The Holy Spirit is one of the unit of the Trinity. God is presented as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is therefore God. He gives this part of Himself to His people as a comforter. The Holy Spirit is sometimes referred to as the anointing and an active presence of the Holy Spirit is essential for any believer in God (Conley, 2011). The current shift and twist experienced in the world at the present day, necessitates a daily active voice of the Lord. The emergence of catastrophic phenomenon such as pandemic illnesses which leads to loss of lives, pain and frustration, forces a believer to rely on God for sustenance. The presence of the Holy Spirit springs out the comfort much desired in challenging times. As observed in the section above, the Holy Spirit has always been present. He was observed hovering over the waters and participated in creation (Genesis 1:1-2, Job 26:13, Isaiah 32:15). The book of Genesis calls Him the Spirit of God, which is ultimately the Holy Spirit.

After God created everything, he had a discussion with someone. In this discussion God said, *“Let us make man according to our own image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the creatures that move along the ground (Genesis 1:26)”. Clearly, God was having a discussion with someone, because He did not say let me make man according to my own image. The Spirit of the Lord was already observed hovering over the waters, which means the Spirit was there in creation. This can mean God was talking to the Holy Spirit and the Son. The Son was present because the book of John says “In the beginning there was the Word, the Word was with God, the Word was God. Through Him all things were made, without Him nothing was made which has been made. In Him was life and that life was the light of all mankind (John 1:1-4). Jumping all the way to verse 14, scripture says “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and*

only son of God, who came from the father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). This pericope plainly reveals that the Word was Jesus Christ the Son of God. Reflecting on the portions of scriptures cited above, one can conclude that in the beginning, there was God the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The amicable motion would be to surmise that God the Father was having a discussion or talking to the Son and the Holy Spirit, but ultimately talking to Himself as a unit (Trinity). That account depicts the presence and the evidence of the Spirit of God in the foundations of all things.

Throughout the Bible, recordings of the Spirit of God is viewed to bring about special abilities to people who came in contact with the Spirit. Through the Spirit, Joseph was able to interpret dreams (Genesis 41: 1-33). To some the Spirit enabled them to prophecy. The seventy elders who were with Moses received temporary powers to prophecy (Numbers 11:25). The Word of the Lord came to certain individuals through the Spirit and were called to be prophets (Wilson, 2020). They prophesied and anointed kings (Chronicles 24:20, 1 Samuel 16:13). Additionally, the Spirit is linked to God's Word and this is documented in Isaiah where scripture says "*The Lord said He will put His words in His people's mouths (Isaiah 59:21).*" In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit dwelled in God's people on a permanent basis (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). In Acts 2, the Spirit was manifest and the people were filled with the Spirit and began to speak in other tongues. The Spirit of God came upon certain judges, warriors and prophets and gave them extraordinary powers (Numbers 27:6:34, Judges 3:10; 6:34). David received power to conquer the lion and the bear. Additionally, David gained power to play the harp through the Spirit in such a way that the spirit that was tormenting King Saul temporarily left when he played the harp.

Conclusion

Tongues are a Spirit-induced language given to believers through the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Tongues are not mentioned directly in the Old Testament, but the Spirit of God was seen to be always available for the people. He appeared on a temporary basis in the olden times and was given permanently after the glorification of Jesus Christ through the death and the resurrection. Tongues can be a native language which is understood by some tribes and they can be similarly a language that no one understands. Whatever the case may be, tongues are not directed to man, but rather unto God. He who speaks glossolalia speaks to God and also edifies only himself, not others. The Bible encourages the interpretation of tongues in order to prevent confusion in the church. The language of tongues is given through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is given by God's grace as the Spirit determines.

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