

# **Tongues of Angels**



**Steven Cox**

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# Tongues of Angels

by Steven Cox

## Introduction

The following words by the apostle Paul are the best known verses in the Bible on the subject of speaking in tongues.

*“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed no-one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit... I would like every one of you to speak in tongues ... Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.” (1 Corinthians 14:1-2, 5, 39 NIV)*

From these verses it appears clear that Paul was very much in favour of speaking in tongues, and churches today which speak in tongues will refer back to Paul's words as support for their way of worship.

On the other hand, in the face of these verses, many Christians who do not speak in tongues may feel that either they as individuals, or the church they attend, are in some way inadequate.

This booklet is written for people who find themselves in that situation - not themselves committed to speaking in tongues, but unsure of what Paul is saying, and wondering if their personal Christianity is lacking something.

It is hoped that, after considering the Biblical and historical background given in this booklet, you will feel more confident that the modern practice of 'speaking in tongues' is neither a necessary, nor even desirable, part of worship.

### **The context of Paul's words**

As we started with 1 Corinthians 14, let us look at the chapter more carefully.

The first thing that the reader will notice is that the quote earlier is not complete. It shows only verses 1-2, 5 and 39 from the chapter, not the complete text of what Paul says.

This is a common problem with the way people use the Bible. It would be no exaggeration to say that nine out of ten problems in understanding the Bible are caused

by reading ‘out of context’. Too often we read one verse here and another verse there, rather than reading whole chapters, or better still, reading whole books from beginning to end.

Please try this simple exercise:

1. *Think about ‘tongues’ as they are practised in many modern churches.*
2. *Read the whole section of 1 Corinthians from chapter 12 through 14 carefully considering the meaning*
3. *For each verse ask yourself, does this verse support or contradict the modern use of ‘tongues’? Is it ‘for’ or ‘against’?*
4. *Note the results in some way: perhaps make a list of verses ‘for’ and ‘against’, or mark them in your Bible.*

If it happens that you cannot find any verses ‘against’, ask yourself if you are really approaching the exercise objectively. Normally even who are strongly in favour of tongues will, on a verse-by-verse exercise like this, admit that such verses as, for example, 1 Corinthians 14:19 and 14:34 are ‘against’ what happens in churches today.

### **After reading 1 Corinthians ch.12-14**

As you will have found, there are several verses which show some discrepancy between Bible teaching and the modern practice of ‘tongues’.

You may also have found some verses, which you feel support the modern use of ‘tongues’. That is not surprising. However those verses may read differently to you after you have read some of the background information that follows. Please keep an open mind.

You may feel that the balance of 1 Corinthians 12-14 points one way, or the other - ‘for’ or ‘against’. That does not matter. At this stage, the important point of this exercise is that, when the whole context of Paul’s words is read, 1 Corinthians is not as straightforward a proof for ‘speaking in tongues’ as some would have you believe.

The rest of the booklet has four chapters as follows:

1. Tongues in the Bible
2. Tongues in modern churches
3. Does the church today have the spirit gifts?
4. Should Christians today speak in tongues?

**PLEASE READ THIS BOOKLET WITH AN OPEN BIBLE TO HAND.**

## **CHAPTER 1. Tongues in the Bible**

Surprisingly, given the popularity of tongues today, they are mentioned only five times in the Bible. The first mention is at the end of Mark. The next three examples are all in Acts. The final one runs through 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14.

### **Tongues in Mark and Acts**

#### **Mark**

Jesus predicted that the believers would “speak in new tongues” (Mark 16:17). There is no need to look further than Acts to see this fulfilled.

#### **Pentecost (Acts 2:1-18)**

Peter and the other disciples were waiting for the gifts of the spirit to be given in Jerusalem. There were signs (a violent wind, tongues of fire), the disciples spoke in tongues (v.4) and the people were able to hear them in their own native languages (sixteen different nationalities are listed).

#### **Caesarea (Acts 10:46)**

Cornelius and his friends, all of whom were non-Jews, were convinced by the preaching of Peter and began to speak in tongues and prophesy (v.46). The Jewish Christians who had come with Peter were convinced by this and agreed that Cornelius and his friends should be baptised.

#### **Ephesus (Acts 19:1-8)**

Paul found some disciples of John the Baptist who knew very little about Christ and had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. First they were rebaptised. After this Paul placed his hands upon them, and when he did so they began to speak in tongues and prophesy (v.6).

Of these three accounts, Acts 2 is the most detailed, which is not surprising since this was the first time ‘tongues’ in the sense of a gift had ever been heard.

### **‘Tongues’ = Languages**

The word ‘tongues’ has three meanings both in the original language of Acts (Greek), and in older English (such as used in the King James Bible). It can mean (a.) the physical tongue in the mouth, (b.) a tongue-shaped object, like a ‘tongue’ of fire, (c.) a ‘foreign tongue’ or language.

In modern English, however, the word ‘tongue’ is no longer used for ‘language’. This has led some people to think that ‘tongues’ in the Bible are not actual languages. The idea has developed that if it can be understood by a particular nation (like French or German) it is a ‘language’, but if it cannot be understood at all (like the noises heard in modern churches) then it is a ‘tongue’.

This idea is simply wrong - ‘tongues’ and ‘languages’ are the same thing. The Acts 2 account repeats three times that the visitors to Jerusalem heard real languages, not noises which could not be understood:

*“each one heard them speaking in his own language.”* (Acts 2:6, NIV)

*“each of us hears them speaking in his own native language”* (v.8)

*“we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues”* (v.11)

Yes, some local Jews who lived in Jerusalem (v.14) thought that the disciples were drunk (v.13), but this was not because the disciples were making strange noises, but more likely because the sight of a group of uneducated fishermen preaching in a dozen exotic foreign languages was so remarkable. Normally all public speaking in Jerusalem would have been conducted in one of the three languages used for official notices - Greek, Hebrew and Latin (compare John 19:20) - certainly not in the language of Parthians, Medes and Elamites (Acts 2:9). Parthian and Medean might well have sounded like drunkenness to the local residents (Acts 2:15), but not to those who knew those languages (Acts 2:11).

Because in the case of Pentecost it is so clear that the ‘tongues’ were real languages (Acts 2:6,8,11), those who speak in tongues today sometimes claim that the examples in Caesarea (Acts 10) and Ephesus (Acts 19) were different.

Cornelius was the first gentile (non-Jewish) convert. Jews did not admit Gentiles to their religion, and, up until this time the Jewish Christians had not baptised any Gentiles. Even Peter was reluctant to admit Gentiles to the church, and God had to show him three times in a vision that Gentiles were acceptable (Acts 10:9-22, 11:5-11). Peter did not go to Cornelius’ house alone. He went with six Jewish believers (Acts 11:12) who had not seen the three visions, and these six, like all the Jewish believers, would have been against allowing a Gentile like Cornelius to be baptised. In fact these six were “astonished” when Cornelius and his friends spoke in tongues. It was not because they didn’t believe in tongues as this incident is some time after Pentecost. Rather, the six Jewish believers were “astonished” because they didn’t believe that Gentiles could be acceptable to God.

If the six Jewish believers had heard Cornelius and his friends speak in tongues that were unintelligible (meaning that they could not be understood), would they have been convinced and allowed Peter to baptise them? Hardly. That would only have confirmed their prejudices about Gentiles. The six men would probably have said that Cornelius and his friends were crazy (compare 1 Corinthians 14:23) and would have dragged Peter back to Joppa.

The only explanation that makes sense is that they were convinced in the same way as the visitors to Jerusalem were convinced at Pentecost - by hearing God praised in a language they understood. Since Cornelius was an Italian (Acts 10:1), it would not be a miracle to hear him speaking either Latin (the native language of ancient Italy), or Greek (the working language of the Roman army in Palestine), but it would be a miracle to hear a gentile praising God in the Jews' own sacred language - Hebrew - a language which a Roman would not know. (Historical records show that the Romans communicated with the Jewish population in the common language of the eastern part of the empire - Greek).

In any case, the idea that Cornelius spoke unintelligible tongues is contradicted by the evidence of Peter himself:

After the baptisms of Cornelius and his friends they asked Peter to stay with them (Acts 10:48). It is not recorded whether his six companions stayed or left, but the news of what Peter had done spread quickly through the church (Acts 11:1). By the time Peter arrived in Jerusalem there were many critics waiting for him (Acts 11:2). In some ways this is understandable: Peter had, after all, broken with 2,000 years of Jewish tradition by admitting Gentiles to the church - and he had done so without even consulting the other leading disciples. But Peter justified himself, first by recounting his vision, and then by describing how these Gentiles had spoken in tongues:

*“And when I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came down on them just as on us at the beginning.”* (Acts 11:15 TEV)

The important words here are *“as on us at the beginning”*. When Peter says *“us”*, he means himself and the other disciples, and *“the beginning”* can only mean Pentecost when the disciples received the gift of tongues.

In other words, Peter's justification for baptising Gentiles was that the tongues Cornelius spoke were as understandable as the tongues the disciples spoke. These tongues were real languages, and when the other disciples heard this *“they had no further objections”* (Acts 11:18 NIV).

The third case in Acts, concerning the disciples of John the Baptist at Ephesus, is similar to that of Cornelius. In Acts 10 Cornelius and his non-Jewish friends were baptised - in Acts 19:5-6 the disciples of John were rebaptised. As with the baptism of Cornelius, it was important that the other believers accepted the new members. The special sign of



tongues made it impossible to argue with what Paul had done. Unlike the case of Cornelius we don't have direct evidence that the tongues were the same tongues as "*at the beginning*" (meaning Pentecost), but the author of Acts (Luke) having made it clear what 'tongues' meant in the first two cases in his history of the early church, it seems reasonable to assume the third case is also talking about real language.

### **What were the 'tongues' in Corinth?**

The only other mention of tongues in the Bible is found in the quotation in the introduction of the booklet - that of Paul in 1 Corinthians. The problem, as we saw in our 'for' and 'against' exercise earlier, is that some verses appear to suggest one thing and some another. This is mainly because the letter is a part of correspondence with an individual church, which had particular local circumstances. We have the letters Paul wrote to the Corinthians, but 1 Corinthians is a reply to a letter from them to him - a letter we do not have. This does not detract from the universal value of a letter like 1 Corinthians in providing guidance and instruction for us today, but it does mean that there are a lot of things which Paul knew about Corinth that we do not know, and we have to be careful not to jump to quick conclusions. In particular we should not let what is often guesswork about 'tongues' in Corinth overturn the three very straightforward accounts of 'tongues' found in the history of Acts.

### **What was happening in Corinth?**

We have four options:

- A. Learned human languages
- B. Unlearned human languages
- C. Non-human languages
- D. Glossolalia

#### **A. Learned human languages**

Corinth was one of the major trading centres of its time - something like New York or Hong Kong today. Naturally it had people who spoke many different languages. The church at Corinth would have reflected this diversity, and even without 'gifts' there would have been trouble with providing orderly translation for the meetings. Anyone who has ever been a member of a congregation with several languages in use will know this.

It is very unlikely, however, that learned human languages alone explains Paul's concerns. Other congregations - Ephesus, Rome - would have been just as cosmopolitan as Corinth, but Paul does not show concern about tongues and "disorder" (1 Corinthians 14:33) in these churches.

## B. Unlearned human languages

It seems reasonable to assume that at least a few of the members of the church in Corinth could speak in the preaching tongues of Acts 2. Paul reminds the Corinthians that this is what tongues should be used for:

*“Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but unbelievers;”* (1 Corinthians 14:22 NIV)

But why did Paul need to state the obvious? In doing so he indicates that the tongues spoken in Corinth were not preaching tongues. His warning suggests that, instead of being a sign for unbelievers, the tongues had become a corruption of the original gift. Paul confirms this when he says that he speaks in tongues more than all of them (1 Corinthians 14:18), yet we know that when Paul was in Lystra he was unable to understand the crowd speaking in the Lycaonian language (Acts 14:11). That can only mean that the tongues spoken in Corinth were not as intelligible as those spoken by Paul, nor as intelligible as those at Pentecost.

## C. Non-human languages

The mention by Paul of *“tongues of angels”* (1 Corinthians 13:1) means that this is definitely a possible explanation of what was happening in Corinth. But what exactly is the tongue of an angel? Where else in the Bible does it speak of angels having their own language? Nowhere. All through the Old and New Testaments angels speak to men in normal languages. What, then, did the church in Corinth understand by this? Surely Paul would not have written something which was a complete mystery to them?

In fact angelic tongues would not have been a mystery to the Corinthians, as the idea was well known. But the idea did not come from the Bible. Instead ‘tongues of angels’ is an idea that comes from traditions that had grown up in the Jewish communities living among the Greeks.

The text below is taken from a Jewish book called *Testament of Job*, which is dated between 100BC-100AD, meaning that it was written long after the original Book of Job in the Bible, and at about the same time as 1 Corinthians (c.50-60AD). Neither Paul, nor any other apostle, accepted this story as part of the Bible. In fact it is exactly the kind of *“Jewish myth”* which Paul warned Titus to avoid (Titus 1:14). We too should avoid attaching any credibility to such works, even though historically they have some value as evidence of the various false ideas circulating in Paul’s day.

This section of the story describes how Job's three daughters were 'inspired' to compose hymns:

*"So when one of the three daughters named Hemera stood up she put on her cord as her father had said, and she received another heart, so that she no longer thought about earthly things, but she chanted a hymn to God in the **hymnology of the angels**. As she chanted she allowed 'The Spirit' to be written in 'The Garment [of Hemera].'*

*And then Kassia put on her cord and had her heart changed so that she no longer worried about worldly things. And her mouth received the **dialect of the angelic principalities** and she praised God for the creation of the high places. So if anyone wants to know 'The Creation of the Heavens' he will find it written in 'The Hymns of Kassia'.*

*And then the other daughter named Almatheia-Keras put on her cord and her mouth chanted in the **dialect of those on high**. For her heart was changed by putting away earthly things and she spoke in the **dialect of the cherubim**, glorifying God, the Master of Virtues, by showing their glory. Anyone who wants to follow 'The Glory of the Father' will find it written in 'The Prayers of Almatheia-Keras'." (Testament of Job 49:1-50:3)*

It can be seen from the above text that the idea of angelic languages was not just found in Corinth, it was well-known among Jewish communities in the Greek speaking world. But, all the same, it would be a mistake to assume that the text is typical of Jews in Paul's day because it shows four things that were not typical of more traditional Jewish (eg. Pharisee) synagogue worship:

1. The active role of women (three daughters).
2. Emphasis on music and singing (three times).
3. Being moved by the Spirit (three times).
4. Speaking in tongues (five times).

Scholars believe that the *Testament of Job* was written by a member of a liberal Jewish sect known as the Therapeutae. The reason for this is the large number of parallels between the text and a description of the Therapeutae written by the great Jewish writer Philo (c.20BC-c.50AD) entitled *The Contemplative Life*:

Philo notes that Therapeutae were found throughout the Roman-Jewish world but "*especially around Alexandria*" (Cont. Life 21), a city in Egypt with a large Jewish population.

He praises their musical abilities:

*“they compose psalms and hymns in every kind of metre imaginable, which they of necessity arrange in more dignified rhythm .... and then someone rising up sings a hymn which has been made in honour of God, either such as he has composed himself, or an ancient one of some old poet, for they have left behind them many poems and songs in rhyme, and in psalms of thanksgiving and in hymns, and songs at the time of the wine offering, and at the altar”* (Cont. Life 29,80).

Philo also notes the role of the women:

*“They all stand up together and in the middle of the sacred festival two choruses are formed at first, the one of men and the other of women, and for each chorus there is a leader who is the most honoured of the band .... both men and women under the influence of divine inspiration, becoming all one chorus, sang hymns of thanksgiving to God the Saviour - with Moses the prophet leading the men and Miriam the prophetess leading the women.”* (Cont. Life 84, 87)

Although Philo does not mention ‘tongues of angels’ it does appear that there was something ‘inspired’ about the Therapeutae’s singing:

*“uttering in an inspired manner songs of thanksgiving”* (Cont. Life 84)

*“both men and women together under the influence of divine inspiration”* (Cont. Life 87)

These Therapeutae were the opposite of the Pharisees and Sadducees we read about in the gospels. While the Pharisees were very strict, the Therapeutae were liberal and did not adhere as closely to the law of Moses. What is particularly interesting in relation to 1 Corinthians is that the Therapeutae appear to have been close to the Corinthians in their style of worship.

We have a reasonable match between Philo and *Testament of Job*:

1. The equal role of women. (Cont. Life 32,80,83)
2. The importance of music and singing. (29,80,84)
3. Being moved by the Spirit. (27)
4. Inspired speech. (84,87)

We also have a good match with the goings on in Corinth:

1. The leading role of women. (1 Corinthians 11:5,14:34)
2. The importance of music (1 Corinthians 14:7) and singing. (14:15)
3. Being 'moved by the Spirit'. (1 Corinthians 13:32)
4. Speaking in tongues. (1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40)

The above is enough evidence to show that the "*tongues of angels*" which Paul described were not unique. Two Jewish sources, both of which were certainly written independently of 1 Corinthians, describe Jewish worship of similar character.

We still haven't considered whether these "*tongues of angels*" were real or not. Were the believers in Corinth using a special language known to the angels Gabriel and Michael?

Despite the lack of any other evidence from the Bible some people believe that they were based solely on this one verse. But the problem with this is that if the believers in Corinth were really speaking to angels, then why not the liberal Jews in Alexandria as well? Was God giving the Holy Spirit gifts indiscriminately both to people who accepted Christ, and to those who didn't?

What the Jews experienced in Alexandria was not a 'special language' spoken by Gabriel, Michael and the angels, but a name for some other experience. It is likely that their experience was glossolalia.

#### **D. Corinth - Glossolalia?**

Glossolalia literally means 'tongue (glosso) speech (lalia)'. It is a widely recognised phenomenon outside Christianity. Typically a priest or priestess of a non-Christian religion, while supposedly in communication with a spirit of the dead or a local god, will enter either a trance or a state of high emotion and then produce noises which resemble a language but have no meaning.

We will look at this phenomenon in more detail in a minute under the section about tongues in churches today, but for the moment let's concentrate on Corinth.

Surprisingly there are very strong indications in Paul's writings that the problem in Corinth was glossolalia:

*"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."* (1 Corinthians 13:1 NIV)

*“When I was a child, **I talked like a child**, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.” (13:11)*

*“Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a **distinction** in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a **clear call**, who will get ready for battle?” (14:7-8)*

*“Unless you speak **intelligible** words with your **tongue**, how will anyone know what you are saying?” (14:9) .*

*“If I pray in a **tongue** my spirit prays, but my **mind** is unfruitful” (14:14)*

*“I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my **mind**” (14:15)*

The six verses above all suggest that the tongues spoken at Corinth were unintelligible - not from the mind, but noise without distinction. Even if these verses are put aside Paul's next reference to tongues is decisive:

*“I would rather speak five **intelligible** words ... than ten thousand words in a tongue” (14:19)*

There is no way of avoiding the obvious meaning of this verse. Paul is clearly saying that the tongues spoken in Corinth were **not intelligible**. Otherwise he would be claiming to rather speak five intelligible words than ten thousand intelligible words, which makes no sense at all. This proves that the tongues at Corinth were glossolalia.

This is confirmed by Paul three more times as follows:

*“Brothers, stop thinking **like children**” (14:20, compare back to 14:11)*

*“will they not say that you are **out of your mind**” (14:23)*

*“the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not a God of **disorder** but of peace” (14:32-33)*

This idea usually shocks people on first hearing. They protest that such a thing would not have happened in the days of Paul. But one has to ask; why not? The phenomenon of glossolalia is nothing new. It is found in many religions today. It is recorded in many religions in history - predating the problems in Corinth. It has always been with us, and

probably always will be. It didn't go away when Christianity arrived, and it therefore is no great coincidence that one of the first century churches also had this problem.

And consider the other problems in Corinth: divisions (1:10-15), incest (ch.5), lawsuits (6:1-11), sexual immorality (6:12-20), marriage problems (ch.7), idols (ch.8), backsliding (10:1-13), disorderly worship (ch.11), denying the resurrection (ch.15). The "disorder" generated by tongues was the least of Corinth's problems.

### **Corinth - Conclusion**

One of the problems with reaching a conclusion is that Corinth was not only a diverse church, it was also a divided one. Paul lists four groups in the church who refused to fellowship with each other (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). They had taken different names for each group, and probably were divided on points of doctrine as well as practice. As usual with such problems it is likely that they were also split on ethnic or family lines, and that each group was led by a few strong personalities with whom Paul had to deal very sensitively.

Some people have tried to identify the characteristics of each group. For example it is said that the group which claimed to follow Apollos, an Alexandrian, might have favoured liberal Alexandrian Jewish practices (emphasizing music, emotion, the role of women, and 'tongues of angels'), while the Peter group would have been more conservative (compare Galatians 2:11-14). But this is just speculation, and it is clear that Apollos himself had no time for the group in Corinth claiming his name (1 Corinthians 16:12).

It is likely that each of the four groups had problems of one sort or another, and are addressed in turn by Paul throughout the letter, but we can't identify who is who.

Under these circumstances it might be a mistake to pick just one answer A,B,C or D to explain the situation in the whole church. It is probably more likely that there was a mix of all these answers.

Paul's conclusion "do not forbid the speaking of tongues" must mean there were at least some real tongue speakers in the A, B categories at Corinth, but the bulk of the internal evidence from 1 Corinthians 14 (as shown earlier) shows that, whatever other factors may have been in the background, the main problem he was addressing was D - glossolalia.

This conclusion may shock some people, but it is the only solution that can make consistent sense of all the verses in what otherwise becomes a very difficult chapter.

## **CHAPTER 2. Tongues in modern churches**

We have considered 'tongues' in the Bible, now we want to know whether the 'tongues' spoken in many churches today are the same thing as the 'tongues' seen in Acts chapters 2, 10 and 19.

If this is the question, then the answer is no. Anyone can see that the tongues heard in churches today are definitely not the same as those in Acts. At Pentecost believers were able to speak real languages which they had never learned, and - crucially - spoke those real languages well enough to preach the Gospel convincingly to foreigners in their native language. But when has this ever happened in a modern church claiming to speak in tongues?

Let us consider the possible explanations for modern 'tongues'. These are the same four that we considered for tongues at Corinth:

- A. Learned human languages
- B. Unlearned human languages
- C. Non-human languages
- D. Glossolalia

### **A. Tongues today - Learned human languages?**

This option was relevant for Corinth, but we can rule it out in the case of modern churches. People who have learned languages at school are usually well aware of the amount of hard work needed, and are quite unwilling to attribute their talents to the Holy Spirit.

### **B. Tongues today - Unlearned human languages?**

To begin with, at the risk of pointing out the obvious, if modern churches could speak tongues in the way they could in Acts chapters 2, 10 and 19 then they would be using them for preaching. When those big-name foreign Evangelists speak to thousands in a football stadium they wouldn't need a translator any more than Peter needed a translator - the Holy Spirit would translate. Yet the most enthusiastic speakers in tongues today cannot even preach the good news to people with a different language in the same street or village.

par The evidence of observation shows that if modern 'tongues' are real languages, then they are languages of people who (conveniently) do not live in the neighbourhood of the speakers. It is not uncommon for someone to claim that they have the gift to speak some exotic language like Tibetan or Eskimo. This is the kind of claim that can be made in



safety - but such a person is simply a fraud. Take a tape-recording of their 'tongue' to a qualified linguist and you will always find - always without exception - that the person is not only not speaking Tibetan or Eskimo, but not speaking any other coherent language either.

This may surprise many readers. How can anyone rule out that the person is not speaking a language that no-one has yet discovered? There must be tribes in the Amazonian rainforest or the jungles of Borneo whose languages are not yet known? But no, there are not.

Firstly that is because there simply are no languages left that are 'undiscovered'. Since this is a booklet on a Bible subject, it is a nice coincidence that the reason why this is so is largely thanks to the work of the United Bible Societies and similar organizations. Over the past 150 years the Bible, or at least the New Testament, has been translated into more than 5,000 versions - which is more distinct languages than the world contains. Today we have got to the stage where translations are being made into dialects of dialects - which may only number a few hundred speakers living in a single valley. What is more, in the process of making these thousands of translations, the translators have created dictionaries and grammar books, and have amassed enormous amounts of data which are stored and analysed by universities and linguistic research institutions. There are no 'undiscovered' languages left today which a speaker in tongues can claim to be speaking.

Secondly, even without the work of the Bible Societies, there is far less variation between different languages than people imagine. Most living languages fall into one of the major language families, and can easily be identified by comparative linguistics. For example English, Russian and Hindi all belong to the Indo-European language family. They might sound different, but they share a common structure. This applies also to dead languages such as Latin and Sanskrit because these are ancestors of the modern language families. A linguist can identify the language family even if he doesn't know the particular language. For example he might not understand Khasi (indeed, it would be surprising if he did because it has only 500,000 speakers in North East India), but he could probably quickly identify it as a member of the Austroasiatic language family, and, with a little more research, as a member of the Mon-Khmer subgroup of that family. No, he wouldn't know the language, but he would know that it *was* a real language. On the other hand, try giving a linguist a tape recording of a Christian claiming to speak an 'unknown' tongue and he will immediately tell you that this is no language at all - it simply cannot be a member of any language family anywhere on earth because it has no structure. In short, it is gibberish.

This agrees with the words of Paul:

*"Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning."* (1 Corinthians 14:10 NIV)

Paul wrote these words 2,000 years ago, and it has taken almost that long for the science of linguistics to catch up. Anyone today who claims to be speaking in an exotic or 'undiscovered' human language should know that, with the aid of a tape recorder, they can very quickly be exposed as a fraud.

In conclusion, we can rule out option 'B' - the tongues you hear in churches are not modern human languages.

### **C. Tongues today - non-human languages?**

Most readers will agree that we can simply rule out 'alien languages'. Apart from the fact that probes have shown that there is no life on Mars, why would the Holy Spirit give people the gift to speak in the tongues of little green men? This bizarre idea owes a lot to cinema and television, but nothing at all to the Bible.

A much more usual, and more sensible, claim is that the tongues spoken in modern churches are the "tongues of angels" mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13:1. But we have already seen that "tongues of angels" meant ecstatic worship among the Alexandrian Jews and all the evidence points to "tongues of angels" being another name for glossolalia.

### **D. Are modern 'tongues' glossolalia?**

Yes. At least this is what all the experts say (see D. Christie Murray, *Voices from the Gods*. F. Goodman, *Speaking in tongues*. J.P. Kildahl, *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues*. W.J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels*. etc.). Of course there will be some variation among the experts as to exactly what 'glossolalia' means, and people with differing specialities (linguists, psychologists, anthropologists) will have different definitions and explanations of the phenomenon, but on one thing they are all agreed - the 'tongues' are not real languages.

Most anthropologists and sociologists consider Christian 'speaking in tongues' to be little different from the glossolalia practised in other religions. This is partly because it sounds the same, but also because it may have the same medical symptoms (increased pulse rate, dizziness), and fulfils the same social functions with a group (giving authority to an individual's prophecy, or a sense of 'belonging' to a group member).

With glossolalia being so common in non-Christian religions, how can we be sure that when a non-Christian speaks in tongues it means nothing, but when a Christian does it is a revelation from God? The New Testament does not distinguish between Christian and non-Christian glossolalia. In fact it is likely that Christ would have included glossolalia when he said:

*"And when you pray, do not keep babbling like the pagans"* (Matt.6:71 NIV)

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### **CHAPTER 3. The church today and the Spirit gifts**

One question we have avoided so far - but can avoid no longer - is the question of present possession of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

#### **The evidence of Paul**

The question cannot be avoided because of this comment by Paul:

*“Love never fails, but where there are prophecies they will cease; where there are tongues they will be stilled” (1 Corinthians 13:8 NIV)*

This verse is one important reason why many people believe that the spirit gifts ceased after the apostles died.

The second reason is that in the New Testament the gift was passed on only by the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17, 19:6), but it appears that the actual gift of laying on of hands itself was not passed on (Acts 8:19). So when the apostles died there was no-one to pass on the gifts of the Spirit, and eventually those who had received the gift from the apostles died too. In this way the gift of tongues died out.

#### **The evidence of church historians**

The historical records of the church confirm this, for there are no records of the intelligible tongues recorded in Acts occurring again after the death of the apostles. The only accounts of tongues that can be found are those similar to what you can find in some churches today.

The following is a description of the charismatic preacher Montanus (c.160AD).

*“And he became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying in a manner contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning. Some of those who heard his spurious utterances at that time were indignant... But others imagining themselves possessed of the Holy Spirit and of a prophetic gift, were elated and not a little puffed up... and he stirred up besides two women, and filled them with the false spirit, so that they talked wildly and unreasonably and strangely.” (Eusebius History 5:16)*

What follows is description of another charismatic preacher called Marcus (c.140AD):

*“He also enables as many as he counts worthy to share his gift of prophecy. He devotes himself especially to women, and those such as are well-bred, and elegantly attired, and of great wealth, whom he frequently seeks to draw after him, by addressing them in such seductive words as these: “I am eager to share my grace-gift with you, ... behold the grace-gift has descended upon you ... Open your mouth, speak whatsoever occurs to you, and you shall prophesy.” She then, vainly puffed up and elated by these words, and greatly excited by the expectation that it is herself who is to prophesy, her heart beating violently from emotion, reaches the necessary level of audacity, and idly as well as impudently utters some nonsense as it happens to occur to her, such as might be expected from one heated by an empty spirit... Henceforth she considers herself a prophetess.” (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1:14)*

The above is clear evidence that there was a great gap between the gift of tongues as given at Pentecost (c.30AD) and what has practiced only 100 years later. We cannot be sure of exactly what this “babble” and “nonsense” was, but one surviving Christian writer from this period (Pistis Sophia 4.142) records meaningless syllables similar to the glossolalia which can be heard in churches today.

The third reason is simple observation - if anyone has the gifts today then they do not possess them as the apostles did, but only in a much diluted form. The apostles were able to raise the dead (Acts 9:40, 20:11), but Christian healers today are unable to do more than temporarily cure aches and pains, and are often a lot less skilled in doing so than healers in non-Christian religions.

This doesn't mean that God cannot cure, because “*the prayer offered in faith will make the sick man well*” (James 5:15), but that has nothing to do with healing gifts, it is simply God answering prayer. Note that James does not advise people to seek out a faith healer, but instead calls for us to “pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16 NIV).

### **The Spirit without the Gifts**

There is a lot of confusion about the Spirit because too many people are unable to distinguish between the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. How many people are aware that Christ did not wait until Pentecost to give the Spirit to the disciples? In fact the Spirit was given immediately after the resurrection, the very first time that he appeared to them:

*“And with that he breathed on them and said ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.” (John 20:22)*

John 20:22 is probably the most important verse about the Spirit in the whole of the New Testament and yet it is also the least known. The reason for this is that when people think of the Spirit they think only of the gifts and are confused by John 20:22. What did it mean? What was Jesus doing? How could the disciples receive the Spirit, but still not do miracles?

The clue is Jesus breathing on the disciples. The literal meaning of 'Spirit' is 'breath', and it is translated 'breath' in many Old Testament passages. What Jesus was doing was acting out a parallel with the way God breathed life into Adam in Genesis 2:7. This 'Spirit' had nothing to do with tongues or healing, and everything to do with Christ breathing life into a new creation.

This little acted parable of Jesus - breathing on his disciples - is a cornerstone to understanding all those passages in the New Testament about 'new man', 'born again', 'new life', 'new creation' and so on. It is also a cornerstone to understanding 'Spirit' in the New Testament. Once it is understood that the Spirit of John 20:22 and the gifts of Acts 2:11 are not the same thing, then the references to 'spirit' in such letters as Romans, Colossians, and Ephesians are suddenly much easier to understand.

In the vast majority of places in the New Testament where 'Spirit' is used, the context shows that it is talking about a new spiritual way of life, and not about the gifts. Don't take my word for it - read all the letters for yourself and note where the Spirit of John 20:22 fits the context better than the gifts of Acts 2:1.

The sadly ironic thing about this whole question is that even if we disregard all the evidence that tongues ceased (Paul's own warning in 1 Corinthians 13:8, the evidence of Acts, historical evidence, modern scientific evidence), that still doesn't advance the case of modern speakers in tongues one millimetre. Consider this - we know that the real gifts definitely did exist when Paul wrote, yet, despite their existence, the internal evidence of 1 Corinthians 14 (which we saw under option 'D' in chapter 1 of this booklet) suggests that at the very same time, well before the real gifts ceased, problems were already being caused by false gifts. If that were true then, how much more so today?

(If you want to know more about the Holy Spirit, please write to the address on the back of this booklet for another free booklet).

## CHAPTER 4. Conclusion

### Should Christians today speak in tongues?

Now we can revisit Paul's statement:

*"I would like every one of you to speak in tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:5 NIV)*

We should have seen enough evidence now to understand this as 'I would like every one of you to speak in real tongues - like the apostles at Pentecost' rather than encouraging the 'tongues of angels' spoken by others. And if anyone today can genuinely preach the gospel in a foreign tongue, then may God go with them.

Also, it is worth remembering that Paul was here addressing a particular problem in Corinth. If he had really thought it necessary that everyone speak in tongues then why does he never mention tongues in any of his other letters?

Romans 12:6-8 lists the following gifts: prophecy, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership, mercy. But not tongues. Some may claim that 'prophecy' means tongues, but this is nonsense, Paul himself makes clear that these are two different things:

*"I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in a tongue" (1 Corinthians 14:5 NIV)*

In the New Testament 'prophecy' can mean predicting the future, but it more broadly means preaching, expounding the gospel, and praising God - and always in a language that can be understood. Nowhere does it mean 'babble'.

If we are going to take Paul as our authority, then the 'greater' question is not whether Christians today are able to speak in tongues, but rather whether they are able to serve, prophesy intelligibly, teach, encourage, contribute to the needs of others, and show leadership and mercy (Ro.12:6-8). This is what Paul told the Romans to aim for - with not a word about tongues.

Consider all the churches Paul wrote to; Romans, Galatians (Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe), Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians (including neighbouring Laodicea), Thessalonians, and the church in Crete (Titus). Consider also the letter to the Hebrews, the letters of Peter, James, John and Jude, and the messages to the seven churches at the beginning of Revelation. Why in all these letters is speaking in tongues never once

mentioned? If it is so important for someone to speak in tongues to show he or she 'has the Spirit' then why were none of these other churches told?

This just confirms again that the speaking in tongues at Corinth - which led to such "disorder" - was a local problem that Paul was trying to bring under control, not a model which he wanted other churches to imitate.

### **Comparing Corinth and churches today**

Remember that when we compared 1 Corinthians 14, *Testament of Job*, and Philo we found in all three the same common points:

1. The leading role of women.
2. The importance of music and singing.
3. Being 'moved by the Spirit'.
4. Speaking in tongues.

That was enough to show a connection between the church at Corinth and the Jewish Therapeutae in Alexandria. But where else would one find those four points? Aren't they worryingly similar to what are generally known as 'Holy Spirit' churches today?

With such a strong similarity between what was happening in Corinth (and Alexandria) in Paul's day, and 'Holy Spirit' churches today, it is reasonable to expect modern churches to pay attention to Paul's instructions to the Corinthians.

### **A Test for Tongues**

The key passage for churches which practise speaking in tongues is 1 Corinthians 14:27-35, where Paul lays down the rules that must govern tongues - then and now.

*"If anyone speaks in a tongue, two - or at the most three - may speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God"* (1 Corinthians 14: 27-28 NIV)

*"As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says... It is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."* (1 Corinthians 14:33-35 NIV)

These passages show that:

1. - **The words must be intelligible (14:9,19)**
2. - **Maximum of 2 or 3 only may speak (14:27)**
3. - **They must speak one at a time (14:27)**
4. - **There must be a translator (14:27)**
5. - **Women are not allowed to speak (14:33-35)**

### **Applying Paul's rules today**

It appears that almost no church which is already committed to speaking in tongues has ever adopted these rules. Those that do would quickly find that all the steam and emotion would go out of tongues meetings, and the “*disorder*” (Paul's word) would cease.

One cannot help but suspect that this is exactly what Paul wanted, and explains why he wrote in such a patient fashion.

Sadly it is more common that those who are committed to ‘tongues’ will carry on regardless of Paul's words, because they ‘have the Spirit’ - and presumably this means that they think they have more of the Spirit than Paul.

This is obviously a disappointment for those who take the Bible seriously. But it's worth bearing in mind that even when Paul wrote those rules above (1 Corinthians 14:27-35), he did not expect everybody to listen. And if they didn't listen to Paul then, why should they listen today? Look how Paul concludes his five rules:

*“If anyone supposes he is God's messenger or has a **spiritual gift**, he must realize that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. But if he does not pay attention to this, **do pay not attention to him**”* (1 Corinthians 14:37-38 TEV)

Steven Cox



Corinth in the days of Paul.



### Questions

1. What were the tongues at Pentecost?
2. What were the tongues spoken by Cornelius?
3. What is glossolalia?
4. What were 'tongues of angels' at Alexandria?
5. What were the tongues at Corinth?
6. What happened to the spirit gifts after the apostles died?
7. What do you think of tongues today?
8. Explain the 'spirit' mentioned in John 20:22
9. List the five tests Paul gives for tongues.
10. What does Paul say about those who ignore the test?

“Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue  
how will anyone know what you are saying?”  
(1 Corinthians 14:9)

When the gifts of the Holy Spirit were given at Pentecost the apostles preached to foreigners in their own languages. Later Paul wrote to Corinth about the use of tongues in worship. Today many churches practise speaking in tongues.

This booklet takes the Bible’s teaching about tongues in Acts and 1 Corinthians and applies it to worship today.

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