

What the Bible Says About Speaking in Tongues

Chapter 1: JESUS' PROMISE

"What you are seeing is real," a church member told the visitor. "These people are filled with the Holy Spirit." The visitor was seeing a hundred men and women speaking in tongues, raising their hands in the air and singing praises. It was real, not imaginary — but were these people really filled with the Holy Spirit?, he wondered.

Speaking in tongues was a dramatic miracle that helped the Christian church begin (Acts 2). The book of Acts records two other occasions on which the Holy Spirit caused people to speak in tongues, and in his letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul gave instructions about speaking in tongues.

Some churches emphasize the practice of speaking in tongues. They teach that every Christian should speak in tongues as evidence of receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Some of these churches are among the fastest-growing segments of Christianity.

Other churches allow the practice of speaking in tongues, but do not encourage it. In these churches, tongue-speakers may form charismatic fellowship groups within the larger congregation. (*Charismatic* is defined in the glossary at the end of this series of articles.) Still other churches forbid their members from speaking in tongues.

Speaking in tongues has been vigorously debated during the past century. The major questions are these:

- Does every Christian who receives the Holy Spirit speak in tongues?
- Does speaking in tongues prove that the Holy Spirit has come to a person?
- Are those who speak in tongues more spiritual or closer to God than those who do not?
- What role should tongue-speaking have in church meetings?

To answer these questions, we need to consult the Bible. First, let's see what Jesus said about tongues.

Mark 16:15-18

Giving his disciples their commission, Jesus said: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" ([Mark 16:15-18](#)). Then Jesus predicted what would happen: "These signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well" (verses 17-18). These verses do not predict how often these signs would occur, or whether every believer would be involved in each of these signs, or whether believers should make special efforts to display these miracles. To answer such questions, we need to look at other scriptures.

The book of Acts describes incidents of casting out demons, healings and supernatural protection against deadly things. However, believers did not go out of their way to find demons or to be exposed to deadly things. In the case of healing, we know that there were times when it did not happen ([2 Corinthians 12:7-10](#), for example).

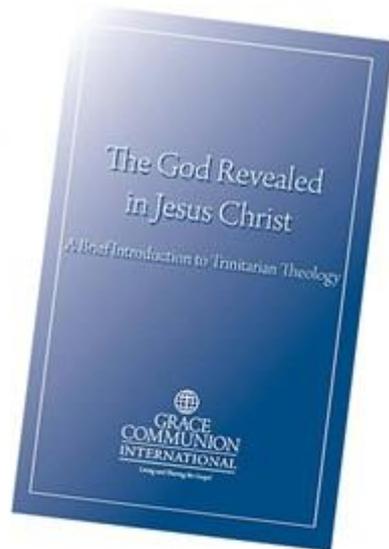
[Mark 16:17-18](#) simply lists a few of the many types of miracles that God's church would experience. This list is neither a command nor a promise for every Christian. To answer our questions about speaking in tongues, we must examine other scriptures.

Acts 2:1-4

Shortly after Christ had risen into heaven, his disciples were observing the annual festival of Pentecost ([Acts 2:1](#)). "Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" (verses 2-4).

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What kind of tongues were these? They were foreign languages. "There were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: `Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?... We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!'" (verses 5-8, 11).

The people, amazed and perplexed, asked one another, "What does this mean?" (verse 12). Peter first explained that they were seeing a fulfillment of a prophecy about God's Spirit (verses 14-21). He then preached a message about Jesus as the Messiah or Christ, and the need for repentance and baptism (verses 22-40). The miraculous languages got the attention of the crowd and allowed Peter, even though he was not a rabbi, to speak with authority to the people.

This experience on the Day of Pentecost is the most dramatic "tongues" incident described in the Bible. This is the most complete description. Let's note a few details about it:

- There were three miracles: a miraculous sound, an appearance like fire and speaking in other tongues.
- The "other tongues" were languages currently understandable by Jews from other nations. No interpreters were needed.
- The crowd may have thought the miracle was in the hearing (verses 6, 8, 11), but the biblical writers call it a miracle of speaking (verses 4, 18).

- Some people ridiculed the apostles and accused them of being drunk (verse 13).
- There is no indication that Peter's sermon, beginning in verse 14, was given in a miraculous "tongue."
- Peter proclaimed to those who accepted his message that they should repent and be baptized and thereby "receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (verse 38). This promise applies to Christians of every century, but the verse does not make clear whether the "gift of the Holy Spirit" means that the Holy Spirit is the gift, or whether Peter meant that, in addition to receiving the Holy Spirit, they would receive speaking in tongues or some other manifestation of the Spirit as the gift.
- Peter spoke of repentance and baptism, but he did not describe any other action needed for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- Thousands were baptized, and many miracles were done (verses 41-43), but there is no further mention of miraculous tongues on that occasion.

The way the story is told in Acts, the apostles' miraculous ability to speak in foreign languages was only one of many kinds of miracles experienced by the early church. Acts describes many other miracles as God guided the new church into growth through the Holy Spirit. None of those miracles is presented as a requirement for every Christian.

For a more detailed study of this chapter, see [Exploring the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2](#).

The book of Acts describes two other occurrences of speaking in tongues — one in Caesarea and one in Ephesus. We'll examine those passages next. (Some scholars say that [Acts 8:14-18](#) reports a tongue-speaking incident in Samaria. The Holy Spirit came upon people in some noticeable way, but there is no mention of tongues, so we do not learn anything about tongues in that passage.)

Acts 10:44-46

The second description of speaking in tongues comes when non-Israelites were first added to the church — perhaps 10 years after Christ's death and resurrection. Up until that time, the church had been primarily Jewish. The apostle Peter had been invited to the house of Cornelius, a gentile (non-Jewish) army officer in Caesarea who worshiped the true God ([Acts 10:24-25](#)). Many people were in the house, and Peter told them about Jesus Christ, faith and forgiveness (verses 27, 34-43). "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message" (verse 44). The Jews with Peter "were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God" (verses 45-46).

It is difficult to discern from this brief mention what these "tongues" sounded like. It says nothing about interpreters, for example, or foreign languages. Nor does it say that the gentiles were seeking the gift of tongues; they simply listened to the gospel and believed. The "tongues" were regarded as miraculous, and [Acts 11:15](#) indicates they were similar to the tongues mentioned in Acts 2.

The miraculous tongues of Acts 10, combined with the miracle of Acts 2, helped Jewish Christians realize that God was adding non-Jewish people to the church. Since religious Jews had traditionally separated themselves from gentiles, God used a special sign to demonstrate to the Jewish Christians that he had also accepted gentiles as his children ([Acts 15:7-8](#)).

Acts 19:1-6

Christianity continued to expand to new geographic regions and include more people. The third and final example of tongues from the book of Acts occurred in the city of Ephesus. Paul found some disciples who followed the teachings of John the Baptist. They didn't know about the Holy Spirit, so Paul informed them more fully, and taught them that John told people to believe in Jesus ([Acts 19:1-4](#)).

Seeking the Gift of Tongues

Pentecostal churches teach that Christians receive the Holy Spirit when they are first converted, but that they are not filled with the Spirit until they are baptized with the Spirit. This baptism of the Spirit is not considered necessary for salvation, but people are encouraged to seek it in order to receive additional power to witness.

Spirit-baptism, Pentecostals believe, always includes speaking in tongues. Therefore, those who desire Spirit-baptism will seek to speak in tongues. However, any attempts to imitate the tongues of Pentecost are attempts to imitate only one of the miracles of that day. There were other miracles that day, too. God will give what he wants to give.

The real lesson of Pentecost is not in the miracles, but in Peter's message: "Repent and be baptized...in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" ([Acts 2:38](#)).

Loosening the tongue does not necessarily require a miracle, but loosening the heart in real repentance does. Whoever believes, repents and is baptized will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. No further steps or tarry meetings are needed.

"On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied" (verses 5-6).

Again, it is impossible to tell what these tongues sounded like. All we know is that these disciples were rebaptized so they could receive the Holy Spirit. Whether they were expecting the gifts of tongues and prophecy isn't stated.

The tongues in Acts 2 and 10 came with significant developments in the expansion of the church. But in Acts 19, we are not told why this group of John's disciples was significant enough for special mention. We do know that it emphasized the need for all Jews, even those who already lived repentant, obedient lives, to accept Christian baptism. It also showed that Paul was an apostle of Christ and that his mission to the gentiles was approved by God.

Tongues-speaking in the book of Acts - conclusion

Let us go back to our first question: Does every Christian who receives the Holy Spirit speak in tongues? The book of Acts records many healings and other miracles, but only three incidents of tongues. This suggests that tongue-speaking was not a common occurrence, but rather a miraculous sign for special occasions as the apostles preached the gospel and established the church.

It seems that most New Testament Christians did not speak in tongues. Several verses tell us that people were "filled with the Holy Spirit," but without any mention of tongues. Let's notice the following verses:

Not long after Pentecost, the apostles were praying for God's help. After they finished praying, "the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly" ([Acts 4:31](#)). The apostles had already been filled with the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Here they are filled again. Miraculous shaking is mentioned, but speaking in tongues is not.

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There is no mention of tongues when the Holy Spirit came on converts in Samaria ([Acts 8:14-17](#)), when the Ethiopian eunuch was converted ([Acts 8:38](#)), when Saul, who became Paul, was converted ([Acts 9:17-18](#)), when he confronted a sorcerer ([Acts 13:8-11](#)) or when Paul first preached in Asia (verses 44-52). This doesn't prove that tongue-speaking did not occur, but it does indicate that it was not important to mention it. Last, we note that the Gospels do not describe Jesus himself as speaking in tongues.

The evidence, so far, is limited. Acts is primarily a story of what happened; the book doesn't contain many commands or promises. Like many histories, it focuses on unusual or ground-breaking events. There is little attempt to describe ordinary practices. The book of Acts gives us only a limited picture of speaking in tongues. However, Paul wrote a great deal about tongues in a letter to the Corinthian Christians. His instructions help us understand whether tongue-speaking is evidence of God's Spirit, of deeper conversion, or of being closer to God.

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