

CESSATION OF TONGUES – PART ONE

TONGUES AS USED IN ACTS

The word for “tongues” in Greek is “glossa.” It occurs 47 times in the New Testament. Out of these 47 occurrences, 9 are used literally and 38 figuratively.

Gifts of the Holy Spirit are not to be understood as “Christianized” secular talents. Talents are given to all, believers and unbelievers alike, by the general grace of God to function in this world. But the gifts of the Holy Spirit are spiritual. That a person is a talented teacher does not mean he will be a good Bible teacher. The Holy Spirit’s work in the life of the believer is a most important factor that must be carefully considered if one is to be a good Bible teacher. It is not the man but the Spirit of God that enables the Christian to use any spiritual gift effectively to bless hearts. Since God is the One who enables, the glory must therefore be given to God alone and no one should rob God of His glory.

The gift of tongues in the Acts of the Apostles must be carefully understood because the description of tongues-speaking in this book has been used by many Charismatics as the basis for their practice of “tonguesspeaking” today. To speak in tongues, according to Scriptures, means to speak a language with understanding without ever going to school to learn it. It is given supernaturally by God. The gift of tongues in Acts occurred four times, all under extraordinary circumstances:

1. Acts 2:1-12 is the event of the Pentecost when the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit in mighty fashion. They spoke in tongues in the presence of the Jews who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost (Feast of Harvest). 15 different dialect-speaking Jews heard the Apostles speak in tongues which caused them to be amazed and to say to one another, “Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?” (Acts 2:7-8). There is absolutely no doubt that what the disciples spoke were tongues, as the people who heard it testified that they heard “every man in our own tongue.” The word “tongues” means “languages” here.
2. Acts 8:1-18 is the account of the Samaritans who, under the preaching of Philip, believed and were baptized with water, but the Holy Spirit had not fallen upon them until Peter and John came and laid hands on them. Then they received the Holy Ghost. Acts 8:14-17, “Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost.”

The passage in Acts 8 is not correctly taught by the Charismatics. Charismatics claim that the Samaritans, under the preaching of Philip, were already believers but did not have the Holy Spirit. So when the Apostles came and laid hands on them, they then received the Holy Ghost. This, they say, is proof of a second baptism of the Holy Spirit subsequent to conversion. They teach that this ought to be the norm; that this is what every Christian must also experience today: hence the laying on of hands for the gift of “tongues-speaking” which is evidence of the

indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They further conclude that before this “experience”, the person is saved but does not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Can a person be considered a believer if he does not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? Although Moriarty rejects the explanation and conclusion of the Charismatics, he is inclined to agree that the Samaritans were already believers before the Apostles came to lay hands on them. The argument he gives is:

The crucial thing to keep in mind is that these converts were Samaritans. To the purebred Jew, the half breed Samaritans were dogs, a rotten stench in the nostrils of God. The age old religious controversy between the Jews and Samaritans still existed at that time, for the Jews had “no dealings with Samaritans” (Jn 4:9). In the first century it was remarkable that Philip (a Jew) preached the good news of the kingdom of God to the Samaritans and they received the message wholeheartedly! But would the Jewish believers accept the fact that the Samaritans embraced the Gospel, considering the bitter rivalry that had gone on for centuries between the two groups? In order to avoid the development of even greater schism, the Lord deliberately withheld the gift of his Spirit from the Samaritan believers (or at least the outward evidence of the gift) until Apostles Peter and John had travelled to Samaria and laid their hands on them to acknowledge and authenticate the genuineness of the Samaritan conversion.¹

Romans 8:7-9 says, “Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.” Here, God tells us that a person who does not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is still “in the flesh.” Anyone who is “in the flesh” cannot please God, for he still possesses a carnal mind and remains at enmity with God, ie. God’s enemy, one who is not born again. This means that the Charismatic teaching of a “two-stage” salvation experience is unbiblical. A person cannot be a Christian if he does not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

How, then, do we explain the incident in Acts 8? The Samaritans believed and were baptized by water after hearing the message of Philip. Among them was Simon the sorcerer. But from the incident in Acts 8:19- 25, we know he was not a believer. The outward evidence was present in the Samaritan “believers” in that they accepted the teachings of Philip. It must be noted that there was no shortcoming in Philip’s preaching. The issue is whether the Samaritans believed and were converted. The word “receive” in Acts 8:15 and 17 tells us that it was in the presence of the Apostles that the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit. It appears that they did not receive the Spirit at the time of their belief and baptism by Philip. As such, we may say that God “deliberately” held back the giving of the Spirit at that point in time because of the age-old problem that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans. This was done in fulfillment of John 7:39, “(But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)”

¹ Michael G. Moriarty, *The New Charismatics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 145.

What John 7:39 teaches is a chronological emphasis rather than a theological one. It must not be construed here that the Holy Spirit was not given or working in the Old Testament period until after the glorification of Christ. The Spirit of God is omnipresent. He does not come and go like man does. He was working from the beginning when God first created the heaven and the earth (Gen 1:1-2). All the Old Testament saints had the indwelling of the Holy Spirit when they became believers. Men like Jeremiah, Daniel, Moses and King David were all saved and had the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; they would not be able to understand spiritual things otherwise. The Bible says spiritual things are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:14). The “delay” here was for the purpose of uniting the church as one, and for the Samaritans to accept the Apostles, all Jews, to be the God-appointed men through whom the visible local church was to be founded and taught.

If the Samaritans had received the Holy Spirit in the absence of the Apostles, then the age-old animosity between Jews and Samaritans would have persisted and perpetuated into the early Christian church. That would have been disastrous. Furthermore, whenever Samaritan Christians encountered church problems, to whom would they go for divine and inspired instruction? The Samaritans would not have gone to the Jewish Apostles, whom God had anointed to be the writers of the New Testament, because they despised Jews. They would probably have continued to worship in their Mount Gerizim and have nothing to do with the Jews. To eradicate this unthinkable segregation and possible schism at the founding of the early church, the first Samaritan had to be saved AFTER the glorification of Christ, and it must be through, and in the presence of, Christ’s appointed apostles. That is why the Holy Spirit was not given to the Samaritans who had believed and were baptized by water. They were not believers yet until Peter and John affirmed their salvation and laid hands on them, and the Holy Spirit came upon them to indwell them. Only then were they actually saved. Subsequently, other Samaritans who believed in Jesus did not need the presence of the Apostles for a genuine salvation experience; the Samaritans had to submit to the counsel and authority of the Jewish Apostles.

When the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit, the Bible does not say explicitly that they spoke in tongues. However, the Bible does say that Simon the sorcerer “saw that through laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money” (Acts 8:18). In order for Simon to have seen something, it had to be external. It was also spectacular enough for him to want to buy this ability from the Apostles. In light of Acts 2 (the incident on the day of Pentecost), Acts 10:44-48 (Cornelius’ salvation) and Acts 19:6-7 (John the Baptizer’s disciples), where speaking in tongues was the external manifestation of the baptism and filling of the Holy Spirit, it is probable that what Simon saw in Acts 8 was also a baptism and filling of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by the speaking in tongues.

3. Acts 10:1-18 is the account of the supernatural conversion of the first Gentile convert, Cornelius, and his family. Though a Gentile, he was a devout man who feared God (Acts 10:2). God not only prepared his heart to receive the gospel but also prepared the heart of the chief Apostle Peter, a Jew, to go to Cornelius’ home to give the word and to see for himself the baptism and filling of the Holy Spirit. This detailed and careful preparation is similar to the Samaritan experience of Acts 8.

A God-fearing Jew was not allowed to enter the home of Gentiles, for that would contaminate him spiritually and ceremonially. In order to persuade Peter to enter a Gentile’s home, God

performed a miracle. God spoke to Peter through a vision. Acts 10:11-16, “And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven.” Three times, Peter was told to eat the “unclean” animals which he had never eaten in his entire life. To have been given permission to eat “unclean” food by God three times in succession meant that Peter was given permission to enter a Gentile’s home.

At the same time, God also prepared Cornelius to go to the house where Peter dwelt, to invite him to his home. Precisely after the trance experience, Cornelius’ servants arrived. God, in a vision, told Peter to go with them to Cornelius’ house. Acts 10:34-35, “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” Peter realized that the gospel must be given to the Gentiles in the same manner it went to the Samaritans, according to God’s command in Acts 1:8.

Peter was not the only one who witnessed Cornelius’ conversion. The Bible says that some Jewish believers saw it too. Acts 10:44-48, “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.” The tongues that the Jews heard were languages because they understood them as magnifying God. What Peter saw and heard was what he saw in Acts 2, as seen from the phrase “which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we.” The Jews who had come with Peter were the additional witnesses, who would testify that what the Gentiles experienced was complete salvation evidenced by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, as also seen in Cornelius’ baptism with the Holy Spirit. Like the Samaritans, Gentiles who subsequently believed in the Lord Jesus Christ did not need to be saved through the Apostles.

If there was animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans who were half-Jews, there was greater resentment between the Jews and the Gentiles. Consider one example: A woman of Canaan (Matt 21-22) called “a Greek and a Syrophenician by nation” in Mark 7:26, came to Jesus for help because her daughter was grievously vexed with a devil. Mark 7:27-28, “But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it unto the dogs. And she answered and said unto him, Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children’s crumbs.” (Matt 15:26-27). Jesus gave reference to her as a dog not in a derogatory way but because that was the Jews’ perception of the Gentiles. Notice that the Gentile woman did not deny the term given by Jesus. In fact, she accepted it in humility and replied that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.

Therefore, with the demonstration of the sign of tongues-speaking as an evidence that the salvation given to the Jews was the same as that given to the Samaritans and the Gentiles, the racial animosity among Jews and Gentiles and Samaritans was removed immediately in the early church. Both Jews and Gentiles had received the same salvation from God through the hand of the God-appointed Jewish Apostles. Ephesians 4:4-6 affirms this: “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

4. Acts 19:6-7 describe the Apostle Paul’s encounter with the disciples of John the baptizer. They were not believers yet for they had knowledge only of John the baptizer’s teachings. Their knowledge came from Apollos who was corrected by Aquila and Priscilla. Acts 18:24-26 say, “And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.”

So when Paul asked the disciples about their knowledge of Jesus, they said they had only the baptism of John. After they were taught that “John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus” (Acts 19:4), John’s disciples were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul laid hands on them, they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:5-6). In this incident, the disciples of John the baptizer were baptized and then filled with the Holy Spirit as evidenced in their speaking in tongues. They needed to be disciples of Jesus Christ and not the disciples of John the baptizer. Again, the tongues spoken by the disciples were languages and what they uttered concerned prophecies.

In conclusion, we see that tongues are languages. They are neither ecstatic utterances nor angelic languages nor gibberish. They are languages with syntactical and grammatical considerations. The Holy Spirit is not the giver of nonsensical speech. The gift of tongues was used by God to unify the early local church. The local church would replace the nation of Israel as the new visible witness of the grace and mercy of God on earth. Wherever a biblical local church is found, the witness of God would be present. This witness must be united and truthful in accordance with Holy Scripture. The Old Testament witness of salvation has now become a reality in Christ Jesus and has been passed over to the local churches. The salvation preached by John the Baptist has also been fulfilled by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ as seen in Acts 19. The gift of tongues was used to bring about this united purpose and the doctrine of only one gospel and one way of salvation.

The speaking of tongues was the external evidence of one who had been endowed with the Holy Spirit for the purpose of uniting the early church under One God, one Lord, one Faith and Baptism so that God would be the Father of them all without distinction or animosity. This was the special Godgiven function of the gift of tongues. It was used as an outward sign to show that Samaritans and Gentiles could be saved thoroughly like the Jews without going through circumcision and other Old Testament rituals. Subsequently, all believers of the Lord Jesus Christ regardless of race, language, or nationality, would be indwelt by the Holy Spirit

immediately when they believe. This is the invisible act of God which the Bible describes as the baptism with the Holy Spirit and not of the Holy Spirit, as the Charismatics erroneously assert. Amen.

