

# Tongues

## What do you believe about speaking in tongues? What occurred on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out?

The issue about speaking in “tongues” is as much a debate in mainstream Christianity as it is in the Messianic movement. There are people in the Messianic movement today who come out of the varied charismatic movements, which frequently emphasize the gifts of the Spirit, speaking in tongues, and other so-called “signs and wonders.” In our experience, many who come out of these backgrounds are some of the hardest to convince of Torah observance and the Messianic lifestyle, because many charismatics are of the opinion that they have “freedom in the Spirit,” yet this freedom often goes beyond what is Scripturally defined for us. We are also continually reminded of the Messiah’s warning to us, “For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:24, NRSV).

We are certainly not of the opinion that the “gifts are dead” and that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were only available to those in the First Century. *We are continuists*,<sup>1</sup> but are also of the opinion that there has been gross misuse of the Spiritual gifts in recent years via some of the Pentecostal and charismatic groups that have popped up, and that we must return to a Scriptural foundation in what the Spiritual gifts actually are. God would not be doing a “new thing” in the world today that does not have some precedent or continuity with what is already seen in the Bible.

Speaking in “tongues,” as it is often manifested today in Christian assemblies and in some Messianic congregations, is often a person being “supernaturally empowered” to speak in some form of unintelligible gibberish. We certainly do not doubt the fact that we can be supernaturally empowered to speak in “groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26, NASU) or “groans that words cannot express” (NIV), as Paul calls them. But these groanings are only intended to be used when “the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us,” and these “groanings too deep for words” (NASU) **are different** than what is commonly thought to be “speaking in tongues.” These groanings could be called one’s personal prayer language with God, and only used when one has an urgent prayer to say and does not know what to say, so the Spirit takes over.

Speaking in “tongues,” as it is Biblically defined, is being supernaturally empowered to speak in an intelligible, foreign language that one does not know, or being supernaturally empowered to speak in one’s native language and being heard by others in their native language which is different. We see this occur in the Book of Acts at *Shavuot*/Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon those assembled: “And they were all filled of the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave *ability* to them to speak” (Acts 2:4, LITV). Acts 2:8 attests that those assembled said, “how do we hear each in our own dialect in which we were born?” (LITV). Those proclaiming the gospel at *Shavuot*/Pentecost not only were supernaturally empowered to speak or be heard in foreign languages, but were also speaking or being heard in the specific *regional dialects* of those assembled.

We believe that the gift of tongues is for today, but that it is not speaking in the meaningless gibberish that it is often credited as being. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:22, “So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy *is for a sign*, not to unbelievers but to those who believe” (NASU). This is because from the example given to us in Acts, the speaking in other languages occurred so that the good news of salvation in Messiah Yeshua could be proclaimed to those who needed it. This is why speaking in “tongues,” or more correctly **languages**, is a sign for unbelievers.

<sup>1</sup> Consult “The Charismatic Gifts Debate,” in Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, eds., *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp 212-224.