

What about Speaking in Tongues?

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Among the many astounding things that happened in Scripture was the Day of Pentecost, when 120 disciples “began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4). It turned out not to be a one-time fluke; Christians were still doing this as much as twenty years later (see Acts 19 and 1 Corinthians 14).

Those who heard these odd syllables coming from the mouths of unschooled believers were “amazed and perplexed,” says Acts 2:7—an understandable reaction. The same happens in our time. The Jerusalem crowd wondered if the apostles were drunk; modern observers occasionally use terms such as *crazy* or *imbalanced*.

I've spoken in tongues as part of my devotional life for about thirty-four years now, and I can assure you the practice does not give you warts, make your hair fall out, or fry your brain. In fact, it doesn't even require working up a sweat (despite what you may have seen or heard about in some religious meeting).

It is simply an alternate way to communicate with God—a Route B that bypasses the usual patterns of stringing words together from a learned vocabulary according to certain rules of grammar. It is instead an unleashing of speech from deep within, speech that carries feelings, needs, concerns, and praises heavenward in a mystical way.

The apostle Paul described his own experience: "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. . . . I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you" (1 Corinthians 14:14, 15, 18).

Modern neurology has learned a great deal about the human brain—and has a way yet to go. Beginning in the 1860s we found out that the two sides are not alike. The left side of the brain specializes in syntax, phonics, and the individual pieces of language, while the right side appears stronger in processing impressions, humor, emotional content, and overall structure. Might speaking in tongues simply be a form of "right-brain praying"? We don't know, but it is worth researching.

Another area worth studying is how often the words someone says in tongues turn out to be a known language. Some linguists have listened to tape recordings of tongues and pronounced them gibberish, without any identifiable language structure. But at the same time, there are too many documented cases of hearers in various parts of the world being surprised by a language they knew (French, Swahili, Vietnamese) but the speaker didn't—which is what happened on the Day of Pentecost.

One of these cases occurred in my own family. A fourteen-year-old cousin who lived in our home began to pray in tongues, the only family member to do so. My parents were skeptical—until a Brazilian visitor to our church approached my father during a prayer time and said, "Excuse me, but who's praying in Portuguese here?" The two men walked to the altar area to investigate, and the visitor singled out my cousin. She had studied no foreign language to that point.

Needless to say, my parents were more open to tongues after that.

What we know from the New Testament is that tongues occurred in Acts more than once when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon people, and that Paul warned us against trying to squelch speaking in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:39). He also said, "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself" (1 Corinthians 14:4), which isn't a bad thing to do. It's not the only way to be built up as a Christian, for sure. But it is a way.

The New Testament also tells us about a second use for tongues: in public worship. Paul spends a full chapter (1 Corinthians 14) on that subject, specifi-

cally straightening out some problems that had developed in the Corinthian church.

His overriding point is this: Tongues alone don't do a congregation any good, for the obvious reason that they can't understand the words. Talking to God is one thing, but communicating with a churchful of people is something quite different. Therefore, public tongues must be followed, Paul said, by an interpretation in the common language of the people, both the tongues and the interpretation enabled by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise it is all a waste of time.

Why the tongues, if the real meat is in the interpretation? A fair question. Apparently the tongues serve simply as God's red flare, a way of getting everyone's attention for what follows. Tongues don't deliver the message, but they do make sure the audience is awake. In that sense, they are like God's burning bush that Moses could not ignore. He was drawn to check it out—and then came the divine words in a language he could comprehend.

Not all churches in our time are comfortable with this, and the Holy Spirit does not force it upon them. He is as gentle as a dove.

The individual used by God to convey his message through tongues and interpretation is no more a superstar than any other gift-channel in the church, whether for teaching, showing mercy, or serving. He or she is merely carrying out an assignment from above. Excessive emotionalism, pride, or an occasional contamination of the message with human distractions are not what the Lord of the Church had in mind. But he seems willing to keep working with imperfect messengers.

We may never fully understand tongues in the sense of being able to draw a schematic diagram of how they occur. But our faith was not made for scientific analysis. We serve a God bigger than our minds, a God who regularly surprises us, a God whose ways are not always our ways—and would we want it any different?