

6. WHAT ABOUT SPEAKING WITH “OTHER TONGUES”?

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And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them ability (Acts 2: 4).

“Have you been baptized in the holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking with other tongues like they were on the Day of Pentecost [hereafter DoP]?”

I remember clearly the day I was challenged with that question by a pastor as some of his sincere and well-meaning church members surrounded me. I was a young pastor at the time. It unsettled me, it challenged me, and it got me searching. I wanted everything God had for me --- especially the excitement, the confidence, and the apparent promise that this supernatural ability would deepen my prayer life, increase my love for Jesus, and empower my ministry.

Maybe you feel like I did? If you haven't been **“baptized in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in ‘other tongues’ like they were on the DoP”**, perhaps you wonder if you are a second-class Christian and that you may have missed out on some blessing --- the promise of *more*?

Let's try to navigate through what has been and still is a polarising and controversial subject. We don't want to miss anything God has promised us. So, is the evidence of the fullness of the holy Spirit the ability to speak and pray in “an unknown tongue” as the Spirit gives utterance? If it is, then let's earnestly seek it!

THIS QUESTION MUST BE SETTLED BY SCRIPTURE, NOT ANYONE'S TESTIMONY OR EXPERIENCE.

The only way to determine God's mind on any matter is to prayerfully surrender to the authority of the Scriptures. Jesus, our model, always considered Scripture (contextually interpreted) to be the final authority in any matter. **“It is written”** was his customary answer to the Devil and to men. For him, the Bible represented **every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt. 4: 4,7,10)**.

Therefore, we must insist that we first go to the Bible to settle our question. We will not first be persuaded by an individual's testimony or by group-pressure, inspiring and persuasive as these may be.

THE KEY SCRIPTURE

There is a generally accepted rule of hermeneutics (Bible interpretation) called **“the rule of first mention”**. Simply stated the principle recognizes that, the first time any word or subject is recorded in the Scriptures, that usually defines subsequent developments and understandings of that subject.

Acts 2: 1-11 is the first time the gift of “tongues” appears in the New Testament. ¹ It's especially critical given the historical significance of the DoP we've already considered in our previous article *Why Pentecost?* Recall the DoP was when the ascended Christ poured out the promised gift of God's

¹ **Mark 16:17** is overwhelmingly considered by textual experts to be a later addendum to Mark's Gospel. Nevertheless, it records the very early testimony of the first disciples' belief and practice.

holy Spirit upon the disciples so they could be his effective witnesses in all the world. The “tongues” came in the context of powerful anointing for service and ministry.

THE THREE MIRACULOUS SIGNS

Besides the “tongues”, don’t forget there were two other miraculous signs which also gave an important impetus for evangelism on the DoP. First, there was the **sudden sound like the blowing of a violent wind from heaven which filled the whole house where they were sitting**. Second, there appeared what **seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them (Acts 2: 1-3)**.

So there were three miraculous manifestations of the Spirit’s coming; wind, fire, inspired speech. In Jewish minds, each of these was considered to be a sign of God’s presence. Such a threefold witness was powerfully convincing.

1. **Wind**. Depending on context, the Hebrew word *ruach* can mean *wind* or *spirit*. The same is true for the Greek word *pneuma*. This nuanced possibility often provides a delightful interplay of association. For instance, remember Jesus’ own statement about the one who is “born from above” in **John 3: 8?** ...

“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Israel looked forward to a prophesied Messianic age being ushered in by the *breath/Spirit* of God. It would be like the blowing over a valley of dry bones bringing new life to the nation (**Ez. 37: 9-14**).

On the DoP the rushing and strange noise of the wind which filled the house where the disciples were must have reminded them of Jesus’ previous action when he *blew on* them and commanded them to **“Receive the holy Spirit” (John 20: 22)**.

2. **Fire** was also a well-known symbol of God’s presence among the Jews. There was the burning bush, the pillar of fire by night, the consuming fire on Mount Sinai, the hovering fire over the tabernacle (**Ex. 3: 2-5; 13:21; 24:17; 40: 38**). The apocalyptic book of **1 Enoch** depicts God’s heavenly court as **surrounded by tongues of fire (14:8-25)**. **Enoch** also talks about **tongues of living fire** in the heavenlies (71:5).

John the Baptist had predicted Jesus would baptise **with the holy Spirit and with fire (Mt. 3: 11)**.

3. **Inspired speech** in Israel had always been associated with the Spirit’s coming upon individuals for specific purposes (e.g. **Num. 11: 26-29; I Sam. 10: 6-12**). However, with the passing of the last of the writing prophets in the early post exilic period, the belief arose in Judaism that the spirit of prophecy had ceased in Israel. Since then, it was thought, God spoke to the people through The Torah --- as interpreted by the teachers of the Law!

However, the Jews expected that when the Messianic Age dawned there would be a special outpouring of God’s Spirit. The spirit of prophecy would flourish again.

Thus, all three miraculous signs on the DoP --- wind, fire and inspired speech --- when *combined* proved a powerful witness to the Jews that God was instituting the new Messianic era with *power*.

The disciples themselves were in no doubt this was the case. The outpoured Spirit of God was proof that Jesus was now sitting at God’s right hand in heaven. He was now the Lord of God’s New World Order. He was the King of kings, invested by his Father with all authority in heaven and on earth. He

was appointed to be the Judge of the living and the dead. Every knee will and must bow before this newly coronated Messianic Lord to the glory of God the Father.

So, let's take a closer look at the miraculous sign of "tongues" that first occurred on the DoP. Their usage and their purpose will be defined and determined by this first occurrence.

THESE "TONGUES" WERE LANGUAGES ALREADY BEING SPOKEN THROUGHOUT THE WORLD.

ACTS 2 leaves us in no doubt whatsoever that the "tongues" given by the inspiration of the Spirit were regular languages in current use throughout the Roman Empire. **Devout Jews from every nation** were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost and they heard the disciples **speaking in the native language of each** region where they had been born. **Amazed and astonished, they asked;**

"And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocea, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Liya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome ... Cretans and Arabs --- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power" (Acts 2: 5f NRSV)?

Let's put this first in the negative: The astonishment of these **devout Jews from every nation** in the empire was **not** because they were listening to "unknown tongues" which needed interpretation before they could understand. They were each able to listen to their own dialect in which they **were born (v. 8)**. Nobody needs an interpreter if they are listening to their first and primary language! ²

Also, the "tongues" the disciples were speaking under the Spirit's inspiration are **not** said to sound like or to be the "tongues of angels" from heaven. The amazement of the crowd did **not** arise because they were listening to ecstatic babbling that needed interpretation.

Stating this in the positive: The "tongues" were languages known and commonly spoken throughout the world at that time. The Pentecost "tongues" had normal syntax and worked according to the usual rules of grammar. They were not uncontrolled babblings --- which to the Jews on the DoP would have indicated insanity, rather than merely being **drunk with sweet wine (Acts 2: 12)**! So, it would be far more helpful, and leave a far more accurate picture, if we dropped altogether the old English translation "tongues" and instead talked about 'languages' (which most modern Bible translations do nowadays anyway).

The Greek word *glossa* is used in the NT 50 times. Sixteen of those instances refer to the tongue in our mouth --- the physical organ. Once --- already in **verse 3** of this very chapter --- it refers to the **divided tongues as of fire** which sat over each of the disciples' heads. In all other instances it means regular and known languages that are in use by the various ethnicities in the world.

Fifteen languages were identified on that day. The point is that no one **from every nation under heaven** who was present on the DoP missed out on hearing **the mighty works of God (Acts 2: 5, 11)**.

The Greek text in **verse 6**, and again in **verse 8**, actually has the astonished people asking, **"And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language [dialektos]"?** You will see that our English word "dialect" derives from that word. It is, of course, appropriately translated as **native language**.

² A popular idea that's gained some currency of late is that, the miracle was not in the ability to speak in previously unknown foreign languages, but rather was it a miracle of hearing experienced by the listeners. This, in spite of the clear textual assertion that the Spirit was giving ability to "utter" the "tongues"! The miracle was in the speaking --- not in the interpreting.

Furthermore, the writer of the Book of Acts, Dr. Luke, uses a rare word that in its three occurrences in Acts stresses clarity of speech, talking with solemn declaration. ³ Literally, we may translate in Acts 2: 4 how all the disciples **began to speak out [declare] in other languages as the Spirit inspired them.**

In Acts 2: 14 Peter **raised his voice and addressed them** in his powerful sermon. And in Acts 26: 25 in Paul's defence before Agrippa II and Festus, that apostle says, **"I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking [declaring] the sober truth."**

This last reference is particularly informative, because Paul is contrasting his solemn declaration of the truth of the Gospel over babbling incoherently out of madness! ⁴ **Paul declares he is totally in control of his mind and speech, exactly as Peter declares they were at Pentecost!**

It's very interesting that one of the language-groups the disciples were speaking in was from Judea (v. 9). The Judeans were amazed at how perfectly their dialect was being spoken, because the Galileans had great difficulty pronouncing the Hebrew gutturals. They habitually 'swallowed' syllables when they spoke. Residents from Jerusalem could spot the Galileans a mile away as soon as they opened their mouths --- and, they looked down upon them for this, thinking them uncultured. ⁵

THE HEARING TOOK PLACE OVER AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF TIME!

So exactly what was it that drew the curiosity of the crowd? Was it the noise of the violent wind or was it the various miraculously-given languages --- with their unique verbal content --- being spoken by the Galilean disciples, or the combination thereof? ⁶ The text is rather nuanced, so the commentators are somewhat divided on this one. I think the best way to translate verse six comes out looking like this;

When they heard this sound (i.e. the rushing violent wind of v. 2), **a crowd came together** (what was this strange noise and where was it coming from?). When they sourced it out, **they were bewildered because each one heard them speaking in his own language.**

The verb 'heard' is in **the imperfect tense** which means the crowd was listening to the languages over an undefined period of time on the DoP. The picture seems to be that the crowd first heard the various languages near to the upper room where they had first been attracted by the noise of the strange wind. Then they spilled out into the neighbourhood streets, and thence to where they finally ended up in the Temple precincts where Peter delivered his "interpretation" of the phenomena!

Putting all of this grammatical and contextual evidence together, we are to understand that the utterances of Acts 2: 4 were, without doubt, **recognised languages used all over the Roman Empire.** The crowd's astonishment and puzzlement was that these disciples from Galilee were speaking with fluency and with proper pronunciation the mighty deeds of God in Christ --- as though they had actually been born in those regions where the dialects originated.

The question arises: Is this "first mention" of the miraculous gift of previously unlearned foreign languages for public proclamation in Acts 2 determinative for the rest of the New Testament? Or is there any justification for today's practice of praying "in a private prayer language" --- as commonly taught from **First Corinthians 12-14**? We shall address this good question in articles to follow.

But, for now, we must ask the inevitable follow-up question: Is this gift of speaking in "unlearned native languages" available today? Remember our opening question? **"Have you been baptized in**

³ *Apophthengomai* ... to speak out, to talk, to declare clearly and solemnly.

⁴ *Mainomai* ... means incoherent babbling from madness!

⁵ E.G. Peter's speech in **Matt. 26: 73; Acts 4: 13.**

⁶ Evidently only the disciples in the upper room saw the tongues of fire distributed over each head.

the holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking with other tongues like they were on the Day of Pentecost?"

The pastor who so challenged me in front of his parishioners believed he had been baptised with the holy Spirit like they were on the DoP because he could speak with "other tongues". But of course, he was being very selective. He couldn't remember the noise of a violent rushing wind when he was baptised with the holy Spirit as happened on the DoP. Nor could he recall any tongue of fire sitting over his head like they experienced on the DoP.

The only sign he could claim like the DoP was his gift of "tongues". But upon further investigation, this part of the equation also did not line up with what the disciples received when they were baptised with the holy Spirit on the DoP. You see, he claimed his "tongues" were "a private prayer language". His "tongues" assisted him to worship the Lord. He claimed he could by-pass his mind and eliminate his human understanding (which hindered the release of unbridled prayer).

I therefore concluded that his "private tongues" never met the criteria of being recognisable languages as used by the various ethnicities on the DoP. His "tongues" had never been used to preach an evangelistic sermon and to declare the mighty deeds of Christ's Gospel to other nationalities. His "tongues" had never brought an unbeliever from another language group to faith, repentance and baptism, like they did on the DoP.

There are only two other occasions recorded in Acts where "languages" are mentioned. They also appear in the context of evangelism (Cornelius' household in [Acts 10](#) and John the Baptist's disciples in [Acts 19](#)). For now, we only have space to say there are many well-documented cases where the same miraculous gift of speaking in a previously unlearned language for the purpose of evangelism as on the DoP have occurred ...

A LITTLE MODERN HISTORY: CHARLES F. PARHAM --- "THE FATHER OF PENTECOST" ⁷

[Charles Fox Parham](#) (b. 1873 d. 1929) is called "The Father of Pentecost" because he did the most in the modern era to restore belief in the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking with other tongues. He also did much to promote the gift of healing and saw many thousands of converts to Christ through his Gospel preaching. He served in the U.S.A.

Relevant to our topic are a number of stories of "tongues" speaking. It is recorded that during a special visitation of the Holy Spirit's anointing upon one of Parham's meetings, one of his students named [Agnes Ozman](#) asked for Parham to lay his hands on her and to pray for her to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. She believed she was called to the mission field and felt she needed the power of God for that.

Apparently at this early stage, Parham felt ill-equipped and hesitated, telling Agnes that he himself did not speak in other tongues. But she persisted, and Parham prayed and laid his hands on her head. Parham later wrote about what happened like this;

[I had scarcely repeated three dozen sentences when a glory fell upon her, a halo seemed to surround her head and face, and she began speaking in the Chinese language, and was unable to speak English for three days." ⁸](#)

⁷ The following accounts are from Roberts Liardon in *God's Generals: Why They Succeeded and Why Some Failed*, Albury Publishing, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 9th Printing.

⁸ Ibid, p119

Parham states that she completely overflowed with the supernatural power of God. Subsequently, Parham testified that he himself was filled with the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other “tongues”;

Right then and there came a slight twist in my throat, a glory fell over me and I began to worship God in a Swedish tongue, which later changed to other languages and continued ...⁹

Soon the news of what God was doing meant **the meetings were besieged by secular newspaper reporters, language professors, and government interpreters.** They sat in on the services to tell the whole world of this incredible phenomenon. And they had come to the consensus that [the] students were speaking in the languages of the world. And their newspapers screamed with the headlines “Pentecost! Pentecost!” Newsboys shouted, “Read about the Pentecost!”¹⁰

MARY WOODWORTH-ETTER --- “DEMONSTRATOR OF THE SPIRIT”

One incredible story involved a Romanian family. Their daughter suffered from tuberculosis and two Pentecostal women had come to their house to pray for her. Discovering that their daughter had been healed after the prayer, the family searched for a Pentecostal church and found the Tabernacle.

During their first service, a lady who had been miraculously healed from cancer, stood and delivered a message in tongues for twenty-eight minutes. Some wondered why Sister Etter allowed her to continue so freely in the Spirit for such a length of time. But their questions were answered the next Sunday when it was learned that this woman was speaking Romanian, a language she had never heard nor learned.

This little Romanian family heard a message from God in their own language as they sat listening, completely overwhelmed. The father was the only one who could speak English. It has been said that Maria and the Tabernacle members “learned to expect such experiences as much as some congregations expect to sing the doxology at the end of their services.”¹¹

IN THE HIGHLANDS OF NEW GUINEA.

I shall never forget the young missionary couple our church prayed for as they set out to work on the mission field in the highlands of Papua, New Guinea. **Stephen and Joy Hill** returned home for furlough after a couple of years and told their remarkable story to the church, which by the way, was a very evangelical Church of Christ --- but in which I never personally witnessed anybody claiming to be baptized in the Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. That experience, if you wanted it, was the province of the local Pentecost Assemblies!

Well, **Steve & Joy** reported that upon their arrival at one of the remote highland villages in Papua, the news spread about the white fellas’ coming. Pretty soon, whole villages started arriving from the jungle surrounds and they motioned for a message. They became restless for some communication!

The missionary couple did not know any of the local dialect yet, but did have some basic Pidgin English. As they stood up and began a few broken words in Pidgin, the Spirit fell upon them and they were suddenly supernaturally empowered to preach in the very language of those natives. Apparently the villagers heard a mighty Gospel message about Jesus Christ and the love of God and the salvation His Son was offering them, for they called on the name of the Lord and were baptised!

⁹ Ibid, p 120

¹⁰ Ibid, p 120

¹¹ Ibid, p 69

The people listened gladly for a long time that day. Many believed the word of the Gospel. It was a miracle of communication, no doubt. But here's the strange thing. After that initial outpouring of God's Spirit that couple never experienced that phenomenon again --- they had to spend the next so many years in careful and painstaking study of the language of those tribes people!

To be continued ...