Pentecost: Biblical Purpose of Speaking in Tongues



Foreword

The Day of Pentecost, described in **Acts 2** of the Holy Bible, is one of the most important events in the early Christian church. On that day, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, and they began speaking in other languages (commonly called “tongues”).

This essay examines four main topics, with the Holy Bible as our primary and authoritative source:

- What the Bible teaches about the origin and purpose of speaking in tongues
- How the practice has developed throughout church history
- How the events of Pentecost relate to Jesus’ Great Commission (the call to take the gospel to the whole world)
- The difference between genuine biblical speaking in tongues and unintelligible speech often called “gibberish”

To examine these issues carefully, the essay also draws from scholarly studies, including historical, linguistic, and cessationist viewpoints. **The goal is to offer a clear and balanced discussion that remains firmly grounded in Scripture**

Pentecost: Creation and Purpose of Speaking in Tongues

On the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them (**Acts 2:4**). People gathered from many nations were amazed because each person heard the disciples declare the mighty works of God in their own native language (**Acts 2:6–11**). This was not meaningless speech. It was a supernatural ability to speak real human languages the speakers had never learned.

This event fulfilled Joel's prophecy, in which God promised to pour out His Spirit in the last days (**Acts 2:16–21**). It also reversed the confusion of languages that began at the Tower of Babel (**Genesis 11**). Speaking in tongues at Pentecost served as a powerful sign. It confirmed that God was at work and launched the church's mission "**to the end of the earth**" (**Acts 1:8**). The disciples primarily praised God in these languages, and afterward Peter preached the gospel in a language everyone could understand, leading to about three thousand people becoming believers.

In **1 Corinthians 12–14**, the apostle Paul gives further instructions about speaking in tongues. He explains that the person speaking in a tongue is speaking to God, not to people, and saying things others cannot understand without interpretation. This can build up the speaker, but in a church gathering it builds up the whole group when someone interprets what is said. Paul encourages believers to desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy, because prophecy is clearly understood and strengthens the church. At the same time, he does not forbid speaking in tongues and says that he himself speaks in tongues more than anyone (**1 Corinthians 14:18–19, 39**).

In short, the Bible presents speaking in tongues as a genuine work of the Holy Spirit—used at Pentecost to praise God and launch the church's mission, and later regulated by Paul to bring order and encouragement rather than confusion.

Background and Historical Movement for Speaking in Tongues

In the early centuries of the church, some leaders wrote about believers speaking in other languages by the power of the Holy Spirit. Irenaeus, writing around AD 180, said that many Christians “through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages” and used these gifts to help others and share the message of God. Similar reports appear in later writers, though they become less common over time.

In the mid-to-late second century, a movement known as Montanism arose, led by Montanus and two women named Priscilla and Maximilla. They claimed to receive direct messages from the Holy Spirit through ecstatic prophecy. Some church leaders, such as Eusebius, strongly criticized their practices, describing them as frenzied and unlike the orderly speaking in tongues described in the New Testament. Whether their experiences were the same as the gift of tongues in Acts and 1 Corinthians remains a matter of debate.

After the early centuries, clear reports of speaking in tongues became rare in the mainstream church. Some early writers, including Chrysostom and Augustine, came to view the gift as something that mainly belonged to the time of the apostles.
The modern Pentecostal movement began in the early 1900s within the Holiness movement. In Topeka, Kansas, Charles Fox Parham taught that speaking in tongues was the biblical sign of being baptized in the Holy Spirit. On January 1, 1901, one of his students, Agnes Ozman, and others began speaking in tongues. A few years later, William J. Seymour, an African American preacher influenced by Parham’s teaching, led a major revival on Azusa Street in Los Angeles beginning in April 1906. The meetings were known for spontaneous worship, reports of healing, people from different races worshiping together, and speaking in tongues. Those who took part believed God was restoring the experience of the Day of Pentecost.

The Azusa Street Revival spread quickly and became the main starting point of the modern Pentecostal movement. From there, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity grew worldwide. Today, these movements include hundreds of millions of believers.

Pentecost: The Beginning of the Great Commission

Jesus linked the coming of the Spirit to worldwide witness: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (**Acts 1:8**). Pentecost inaugurated this empowerment. The Great Commission (**Matthew 28:18–20; cf. Luke 24:47–49**) commands making disciples of all nations, promising Christ's presence "to the end of the age."

The longer ending of **Mark (16:15–18**) includes "these signs will accompany those who believe… they will speak in new tongues." Critical textual scholarship widely regards **Mark 16:9–20** as a later addition (absent from the earliest manuscripts), likely composed in the second century to provide a suitable conclusion and drawing on traditions found in Acts and elsewhere. Even so, it reflects early church expectation that mission would be accompanied by confirming signs. Pentecost thus marks the beginning, not the end, of the Spirit-empowered mission that continues until Christ's return. Whether the specific gift of tongues continues in the same form is debated between cessationists (who see sign gifts as foundational and completed with the canon) and continuationists (who find no explicit cessation text and point to ongoing mission need). **The Commission itself remains binding until the end of the age**.

Difference Between

a. False Tongues (Gibberish)

Much of what is called "speaking in tongues" today is simply made-up sounds that do not form a real language. These sounds may follow a pattern and can even be learned by listening to others and copying them. However, they do not have the normal structure of any actual human language (such as grammar or real vocabulary). When native speakers of different languages listen to it, they do not recognize it as their language or any language they know.

This kind of speech does not match what happened on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, where people clearly understood the disciples speaking real languages and praising God. It also goes against the instructions Paul gave in 1 Corinthians 14. Paul said that if someone speaks in tongues in a church meeting without an interpretation, it only creates confusion instead of helping people. He also taught

that the mind should not be left out—speaking should bring real benefit, not just emotional expression.

Any form of babbling that does not honor Christ, bring order, or produce good spiritual fruit is not the biblical gift of tongues.

b. True, Biblical Tongues

True speaking in tongues, as described in the Bible, is the ability the Holy Spirit gives to speak in a real human language the person has never learned. At Pentecost, this served as a clear sign from God. The disciples used it to praise God, and it helped open the door for the gospel to be preached to people from many nations.

In **1 Corinthians 14**, Paul explains how the church should use this gift. Only two or three people should speak in tongues during a meeting, and someone must interpret what is said so everyone can understand and be encouraged. The goal is always to build up the church, not to create chaos. Paul valued the gift, but he made it clear that it must be used in an orderly and loving way.

The biblical standard is simple: when tongues are used publicly, people should be able to understand the message (either directly or through interpretation). Everything should be done in order, with love, and with the goal of strengthening believers and pointing people to Christ.

Conclusion

Pentecost marked the beginning of the church's mission to the world. On that day, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the gift of speaking in tongues as a sign and as power to carry the gospel to every nation. This mission, known as the Great Commission, continues until Jesus returns.

The gift of tongues has been, and will continue to be, part of this work. This is true for one simple reason: no one can come to God unless the Father draws them (John 6:44). God alone opens hearts, and He uses His Spirit and the gifts He gives—including tongues—to reach people with the message of Christ.

Throughout history, the gift of tongues appeared in the early church, became less common for many centuries, and then reappeared in a powerful way during the Pentecostal revival of the early 1900s. The Bible presents true tongues as a purposeful gift. It is meant to praise God, strengthen believers, and help spread the gospel. Paul taught that it should be used with order and love so that everyone is built up, not confused.

The goal is not to chase spiritual experiences for their own sake. The goal is to rely on the Holy Spirit for the power needed to share the gospel, love one another, and build up the church. As long as the Great Commission remains, God will continue to use His Spirit and the gifts He gives to draw people to Himself until Christ returns.