



## About Speaking in Tongues

by Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about speaking in tongues? Now, it's always risky assuming we know what other people believe or think, but we have a pretty impressive body of writing by these first Christians. And from those writings we can get an idea of what their experiences were and what they thought about them.

Now, just to clarify: When I speak of “the first Christians”, I'm talking about those Christians who were alive and active *while* the various books of the New Testament were being written. That puts them all in the first century, and mostly before the fall of Jerusalem. I'm not arguing a case for what 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christians *should* practice; that's an issue that churches will have to decide for themselves. But if we *do* differ from what the first Christians believed and practiced, reason suggests that we should frankly acknowledge the difference and offer a reason for it. But I'm not so much interested in the modern practice of tongues-speaking as I am in what the first Christians believed and practiced. (If you want to look at the modern practice, there's an interesting article on Wikipedia, on the internet, about speaking in tongues.)

The logical place to start, in the Bible, is with the first instance of speaking in tongues recorded. To put it in perspective, though, I want you to consider something that Jesus said—one of the *last* things he said—to his disciples. It's in Matthew 28, verse 18. He said:

### Matthew 28

NKJV

<sup>18</sup> [...] All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

<sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

<sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. [...]

“All the nations”. Actually, the Greek word that you find here [*ethnos*, ἔθνος, Strong's G1484] is usually rendered “Gentiles”, but nevermind; the point being, this was going to have to be preached in places where Hebrew, or Aramaic, and perhaps *not even Greek* were spoken. Now, there is no record that this seemed remarkable to the disciples, and there may be reason to think they didn't really grasp the problem for some time to come.

In any case, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus the body of disciples had some thinking to do. Every expectation they had held about the Messiah...well, it seemed like nearly all of them had been turned on their head. When they came to the Day of Pentecost, Jesus had only been gone for 10 days. Strange to say, after all that Jesus had done, and when you consider the miracles and people that followed him around all those years, it's just staggering to realize there were only 120 disciples left in Jerusalem when that Day of Pentecost came. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean there were no disciples somewhere else, but this was the group present on this occasion. The story begins in Acts 2, verse 1:

**Acts 2**

NIV '84

<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

No surprise there. It's a holy day; they met together.

**Acts 2**

NIV '84

<sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

<sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

<sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now, we have two things to think about. Luke is the man who wrote this down. What did Luke think about what had happened on that day? We don't know if he was even *there* or not, or if he simply put his story together from talking to everybody who was. What did *he* think? What was the reason for this miracle? And, in fact, what was it that *actually happened*.

**Acts 2**

NIV '84

<sup>5</sup> Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

<sup>6</sup> When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

And, lest there be a mistake, he shifted away from the word “tongue” [*glóssa*, γλῶσσα, G1100] (which usually means “language”) to the Greek word “*dialektos*” [διάλεκτος, G1258]. So, consequently, they were hearing them in their own *dialect*. A dialect...you know, you have the Greek language as it's spoken over *here*; you have the Greek language as it's spoken over *there*. And they probably sound different. When I lived in England (I lived there for about seven years) I remember distinctly chatting with a fellow who lived in Birmingham. And we were talking about how hard it is sometimes to understand people from other countries. And he said, “Oh, I know what you're talking about. I have trouble understanding people from a village 50 miles down the road from my house!” So, regional dialects are what we're talking about here. And they were hearing it; they heard them speaking *in their own dialect*.

**Acts 2**

NIV '84

<sup>7</sup> Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?”

Now, how did they know that? And why was it important? Well, they probably knew it from their clothing—from their style—because I don't think they would pick up an accent in this way. It was striking because the Galileans seemed to be the country bumpkins of that era. (What shall we say, Jewish rednecks?) And they saw them, and they thought, “These people are not educated people. What's going on here?”

**Acts 2**

NIV '84

<sup>8</sup> “Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?”

<sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

<sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome  
<sup>11</sup> (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

Now, what do you suppose Luke thought about this as he put the story together? Well, first, there were about 14 known languages being spoken by people who never before had known or learned or been taught the language. This is something Luke was able to determine. He talked with the people who were there. He talked with people who got baptized on that day. He put the whole picture together and, for him, it was fairly evident what happened. These people were speaking 14 known languages—being spoken by people who had never known them before.

Second (and this is important), the listeners knew the *content* of the messages. I doubt it occurred to anyone that these were *unknown tongues*. Everyone present understood the words. Nor did they think of them as the “tongues of angels” or a “prayer language”. The gift of tongues, on this occasion, was for the *singular* purpose of conveying the message in a language that could be understood by the listeners. This is *utterly* inescapable when you read through the second chapter of Acts.

## Acts 2

NIV '84

<sup>12</sup> Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

<sup>13</sup> Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

<sup>14</sup> Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.

<sup>15</sup> These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning!

<sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> ‘In the last days, God says,  
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,  
your young men will see visions,  
your old men will dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup> Even on my servants, both men and women,  
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,  
and they will prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> I will show wonders in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

<sup>20</sup> The sun will be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood  
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> And everyone who calls  
on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

I’m not sure Peter even, at this point, understood that word, “everyone”, because we now know it concluded the Gentiles, as well. What was happening here was not speaking in an unknown tongue; it was *prophesying* in known languages—14 of which are named in the passage. Now, I have the gift of 20/20 hindsight, but being aware of Christ’s commission to take the gospel to all nations, and being suddenly gifted with the language of Mesopotamia, I might very well conclude that Jesus expected me to *go there and preach*. Would that be illogical? I think it would be *very* logical. When you understand he said, “This is what I want you to do”, and all of a sudden I can speak a language I never spoke before, I’d be starting to check around to see how do I get there, because I think I’m supposed to go and

preach the gospel to those people over there. Also, there's every indication the gift fell severally on *everyone present, including women*. Later, this would happen again. But, for now, Jerusalem was full of strangers and the mission field had *come to them*. They continued for a long time in Jerusalem, and not without reason. There was *plenty of work* right there. But I would have had, nagging in the back of my mind, the word that Jesus used, "Go...". And I think I'd have to deal with that.

Time passed. The scene changes.

### Acts 10

AKJV

<sup>1</sup> There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band,

<sup>2</sup> A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always.

Now, this is an Italian, mind you; he's not a Jew. He falls in the category of people they called "God-fearers". There were people who believed in God, read the Scriptures (or heard them read), prayed to God, and tried to live the right way. An angel appeared to this fellow and told him to send for a man named Peter, which he immediately did; he sent three men. As they approached the location where Peter was, he was going up to the rooftop to pray. Now it was Peter's turn to have a vision. You read all about this in Acts 10, but for now Peter was told he was not to consider anything God had cleansed as common or unclean. Peter was puzzled, but about that time the strangers came into the house below looking for him, and the spirit told him, "Go with these men." So, accustomed to doing what God told him to do, Peter went; Peter preached.

### Acts 10

NIV '84

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

<sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.

<sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

<sup>47</sup> Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

Now, that's all we know about the tongues-speaking that happened on this occasion. The reason for it is easy to discern: Without the evidence of the presence of the Spirit, some would (*and did*) object to baptizing Gentiles. (That's a whole other story all by itself.) But based on what we have read before, there is no reason to think this was any different from what is described in Acts 2—the gift of speaking in known languages that you haven't learned. And as you read through the Book of Acts, there is nothing to indicate that on *every* single occasion the newly-baptized spoke in languages. Not every time did it happen. Now, consider another example—Acts 19:

### Acts 19

NIV '84

<sup>1</sup> While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples

<sup>2</sup> and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

<sup>3</sup> So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied.

<sup>4</sup> Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the

one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.”

<sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

<sup>6</sup> When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

Now, there's not much to go on here, and there is really no reason to think it was different from Acts 2. The statement “they spoke in tongues *and prophesied*” is suggestive that the content of this language spoken was *known*—they prophesied.

But there is one puzzling example that forms the basis for some of the practice of speaking in unknown tongues even today. It's 1 Corinthians, chapter 14. Paul is away from Corinth, and he has gotten messages from them about things that are going on there, and he hears something about speaking in tongues coming back from Corinth. He wrote in his letter, chapter 14:

### 1 Corinthians 14

NIV '84

<sup>1</sup> Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

Now, people with the gift of prophecy were not rare among these people, but their prophesying seems to be something other than the kind of prophesying that John got in the Book of Revelation or that Malachi got when he gave his prophecy. Theirs seems to be more along the line of inspired preaching. It was not a clear-cut foretelling of the future in every case. Now, even when it did involve future events, it seems to have been somewhat indirect in the way it was presented. Paul goes on, though, in chapter 14, verse 2:

### 1 Corinthians 14

NIV '84

<sup>2</sup> For anyone who speaks in a tongue [*a language*] does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.

Now, from this comes the idea of unknown and unrecognized tongues. Here's the question: Is Paul describing a universal principle of tongues, or is he describing the specific occurrences in Corinth? Put yourself in Paul's position. He's not there. He has not seen, he has not heard, what is taking place. He has only heard *of* it. What if there had been an outbreak of speaking in tongues in Corinth that resembles what happens in some churches today?

Paul was informed that it had happened. Paraphrasing what he wrote, he could be saying this: “The one who is speaking there can only be speaking to God, because no one present understands him.” For all we know, the chap had received the gift of the Mesopotamian language, and no one in Corinth understood a word of it. And yet it could have been a very real language. Paul went on in verse two:

### 1 Corinthians 14

NIV '84

<sup>2</sup> For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.

<sup>3</sup> But everyone who prophesies speaks to men [...]

Now, do you want to know what prophesying was in that time?

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>3</sup> But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

It sounds just an awful lot like a sermon. This gives you an idea of what prophesying accomplished. In order to do it, it had to be understood, because it was purposeful—not merely to foretell the future; but to strengthen, encourage, and comfort.

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>4</sup> He who speaks in a tongue [*a foreign language*] edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

To *edify* means to *build*, and I can take this in two ways: One is that the fellow speaking in a foreign language is building himself up—that is, his ego has gotten in control. The other is that the tongue-speaker *understands what he is saying*; so, he edifies himself, but nobody else understands a word of it. So what's the *point* in having him speak to them? Paul writes in verse five:

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>5</sup> I would like every one of you to speak in [languages], but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

And my question, when I read that, was: If he can interpret, what's the point of the language? Speaking, whether in tongues or not, is for the purpose of edifying the church. In other words, the tongue-speaking must have *content*. What sort?

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>6</sup> Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?

In other words, Paul thinks that tongues are *pointless* unless they convey content to the listener. Remember, our question is: What did the first Christians believe about this? Paul is one of the first Christians, and it's pretty plain that he thought speaking in tongues without being understood was pointless.

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>7</sup> Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes?

Reminded me of an old song I used to hear: *Johnny One Note*, who sang out with gusto, and just overwhelmed all the crowd, but he could only sing one note.

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>8</sup> Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?

Every morning we get a *Reveille*, and every night we get *Taps*, and we get the call *To the Colors*, and we get *Mess Call*. (And that's one that all of us listened carefully for during the time.) So the *point* of the trumpet call is to convey information.

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>9</sup> So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air.

So I would conclude that Paul understood tongues to be for the purpose of communication. If there was not communication, he would just be speaking into the air—just so much stuff. And, of course, if you want to know what that's like, if you don't speak Spanish and you happen to be hanging around where Spanish-speakers are, just listen. They might as well be speaking into the air as far as you're concerned. No information is being conveyed to you.

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>9</sup> So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air.

Now, how hard is that to understand. Paul says you need to be speaking *intelligible* words with your tongue—which means *somebody, somewhere* has got to make some sense out of it. Later, in verse 12, he repeats that idea.

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>12</sup> So it is with you. [...]

I think what he's trying to say is that what's happening in Corinth is that people are speaking what *may very well be* a known language, but there's nobody there that understands it, and therefore they should shut up.

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>12</sup> So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

Now, what's the contrast with building up the church? Well, it's kind of building up the self—some display of ego.

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>13</sup> For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says.

<sup>14</sup> For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

In other words, "What's going on in *my* mind doesn't bear any fruit in somebody else's mind."

## 1 Corinthians 14

NIV '84

<sup>15</sup> 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.

Now, I have to conclude from this that Paul thought that praying in tongues involved praying with his mind. “I will pray, understanding what I am saying. It’s problematic if *nobody else* does, but at least *I* do.”

## 1 Corinthians 14

NIV '84

<sup>15</sup> [...] I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.

<sup>16</sup> If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?

<sup>17</sup> You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

Now, when you read through this asking yourself the question, “What did Paul think about all this?”, I get the impression Paul had *heard* that what was happening in Corinth was not edifying people. And that, when a person who was going to stand up and pray, he should not be praying in Spanish or in German or in Mesopotamian; he should pray in the language that is commonly spoken in that congregation. Because the people who are with him are going to say, “Amen”, making it *their own* prayer, when he is through. It’s interesting; Paul said:

## 1 Corinthians 14

NIV '84

<sup>18</sup> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.

<sup>19</sup> But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a [language].

By that he means a language *the others don't understand*. There are two ways to take this. One is Paul was multi-lingual—either through learning or through gift; he doesn't say. Second, you could conclude, “Well, Paul had a gift of unknown tongues.” But *in context*, Paul seems to deprecate speaking in tongues as a pointless showing off—unless, of course, somebody else *understood what it was that he was saying*.

## 1 Corinthians 14

NIV '84

<sup>20</sup> Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.

<sup>21</sup> In the Law it is written:

“Through men of strange tongues  
and through the lips of foreigners

I will speak to this people,

but even then they will not listen to me,” says the Lord.

<sup>22</sup> Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.

What in the world does he mean by all that? Well, if you go back and look up to the scripture he is citing:

**Isaiah 28**

ESV

<sup>11</sup> For by people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue the LORD will speak to this people,

The context of it is that, “I’m going to deliberately speak to them in languages they *don’t understand*, because they’re such a hard-hearted group of people.” So tongues are what God uses sometimes to keep the unbelievers from understanding. Strange thing for him to say, but it’s kind of hard to argue with it. Paul says:

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>23</sup> So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

Now, frankly, this sounds very much like a manifestation of tongues similar to what one might see in a church somewhere today. And Paul says, “Don’t do that. It’s not edifying. It’s not building the church.”

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>27</sup> If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.

Now, that really rolls right down the mountainside. Here Paul has made a statement as clear as anyone could ever understand: Whatever you think tongues are:

**1 Corinthians 14**

NIV '84

<sup>27</sup> If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.

<sup>28</sup> If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

Once again, there are two ways of understanding this. One, A person arrives from overseas and doesn’t speak Greek, even though he has a gift to prophesy. Second, he receives a gift of a tongue that only he understands. In either case, he cannot speak without an interpreter in the church, *period*.

Now, there’s more in 1 Corinthians 14, but the bottom line seems to be this: The first Christians understood tongues as a gift for the purpose of communicating the gospel to people who spoke other languages. And it fit *perfectly* with Jesus’ commission, “Go...”. It *is* possible that something like unknown tongues appeared in Corinth. Paul didn’t want to forbid it lest he interfere with the work of the Spirit, but he knew of a certainty that babbling without being understood was *pointless*.

So we’re left with very little information, frankly, about what the first Christians thought about speaking in tongues. But it seems clear enough that, basically, it was for the purpose of communication.

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*About Speaking in Tongues*

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