DON’T FORBID TO SPEAK IN TONGUES by Al Diestelkamp

Believing as firmly as I do in the Bible as the inspired word of God, and believing also that the gift of tongues has ceased, some might imagine that I cringe every time I read the admonition of Paul, ”do not forbid to speak in tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39). With the prominence given to “tongue speaking” in some religious circles today, I must ask myself if I am in violation of the scriptural admonition.

I consider myself to be open minded enough that—were I to witness the same phenomenon as it was demonstrated in the first century church—I would change my convictions. Or, if through a study of the Bible I could determine that what people today claim to be speaking in tongues by the power of the Holy Spirit was truly from God, I would not resist it. Thus, lest I have overlooked something in the Scriptures or have misapplied them, I have decided to make a study of the subject; and I invite you to study along with me.

With the great emphasis that is placed on this subject, you would think that the Bible would be filled with information on the subject. But such is not the case. Even a slow reader can read everything the Bible says about the “gift of tongues” in less than half an hour, so our task is not that great.

The word “tongue(s)” is found 50 times in the New Testament. Half of these have no reference whatsoever to the miraculous gift but only to the actual body member or to a natural language. The remaining references pertain to our subject. These references can be divided into three categories: Prophecy concerning tongues (Mk. 16:17-18); examples of the use of this gift (Ac. 2:4-11; 10:46; 19:6); and commands concerning the regulation of the gift (1 Cor. 12-14). We shall examine these passages and gather information from them for our conclusion.

**Prophecy**

In Mark 16:17-18 Jesus foretells of miraculous powers that would be demonstrated by believers. He said, “And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. “

At first glance, this may seem to indicate that all who believe will be able to speak in tongues. Indeed, there are some who claim that this is the test of a true believer. However, Jesus didn’t say that *all* believers would have this gift; He simply said that such signs would be done by believers, and He did not indicate that the signs would be done by believers in all ages to come.

**Examples**

In Acts 2:4-11 we see the fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy when the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit “and began to speak with other tongues…” Here we can readily see what this gift consisted of by the inspired record. We find that each man from every nation “heard them speak in his own language.” The hearers were amazed because they recognized these men as being Galileans who would not know these languages. From this we know what is meant when we see references to the gift of tongues in Scripture. Perhaps with this explanation, the rest of our study will be clearer.

The next example of the gift is found in Acts 10:46 after the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentile household of Cornelius. Here no additional information is given about the gift. They received the power in the same manner as the apostles did in Acts chapter 2—by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

One more example is found in Acts 19:6. Here we see the gift of tongues was given by the “laying on of hands” by Paul—an apostle.

In summary, the gift of tongues consisted of the ability to speak in a language otherwise unknown to the speaker but known to the hearers. It was given either to those who specially received an outpouring of the Holy Spirit or by means of the laying on of the hands of an apostle. Now, we will turn to 1 Corinthians 12-14 for instructions concerning the gift.

**Regulations**

In the early verses of 1 Corinthians 12, we learn that the gift of tongues is only one gift among many possible gifts of the Holy Spirit (v.10). This, along with the rhetorical questions at the end of the chapter, shows us conclusively that not all Christians were able to speak in tongues (v.30).

In chapter 13, Paul makes passing reference to “the tongues of men and angels” (v.1) and points out that the ability to speak in tongues without love is useless. Today many claim their utterances are in an angelic language. Paul doesn’t shed light on what is meant by “the tongues of angels,” so we are not at liberty to speculate. Every reference in Scripture to utterances of angels has them speaking in a language that men understood.

Also in chapter 13, we find that, along with the gifts of prophecy and knowledge, the gift of tongues would one day cease (v.8). In verse 10, Paul tells us this would happen, “when that which is perfect has come.” The word translated “perfect“ means “complete,” referring to the Holy Spirit’s completed revelation (as we now have it in the form of the Bible). Thus the Scriptures are able to equip us to be “complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Chapter 14 is literally filled with instructions regulating the use and demonstration of spiritual gifts, including tongues. He tells the advantage of prophecy over tongues and limits the use of tongues in the church to that which edifies, explaining that one must be understood in order to edify. Perhaps there was the temptation to use this gift when it was not needed. Evidently men were speaking in languages to others when there were none who could understand and interpret. Therefore, “no one understands” (v.2).

Later in the chapter Paul tells the purpose of this gift: “Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers” (v.22). This gift was of such a nature that it was convincing to the unbeliever. What we see and hear today is *not* convincing; it is more like what Paul referred to in verse 23 where he warned about appearing to be out of their minds.

The latter part of chapter 14 also is an indictment against modern claims of tongue-speaking. Paul limits these utterances to “two or at the most three” (v.27) in one assembly and only in the presence of an interpreter (v.28) that “all things be done for edification” (v.26).

Finally we arrive at our beginning text: “And do not forbid to speak in tongues” (v.39). Find me a man who can do what we have learned was done by some of the early Christians—speak in a language understandable to others but which he has never learned—and I won’t try to stop him. But no man does this today.