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Speaking in Tongues in Acts and 1 Corinthians

Speaking in tongues (in Greek, *glossolalia*) refers to the act of speaking in a language that is either incomprehensible or, at least, unknown to the speaker. The phenomenon of speaking in tongues played a prominent role in the life of some early Christian communities.

Speaking in Tongues in the Book of Acts

Acts 2 contains a narrative about the events of the first Pentecost after Jesus's resurrection. On that day, the apostles gathered together and, after hearing a sound like wind and seeing tongues like fire, they "began to speak in other languages [literally, "tongues"], as the Spirit gave them ability" (Acts 2:4). The author of Acts goes on to list various nationalities of persons who heard the apostles speak, noting that everyone heard them speaking in their own native languages.

The phenomenon of speaking in tongues is mentioned twice more in Acts:

- After Peter preaches in the house of Cornelius, the gentiles there began "speaking in tongues and extolling God" (10:46). This is taken as a sign that the Holy Spirit has been poured out among gentiles and that they should be baptized.

- In Acts 19, Paul meets some disciples of Apollos at Ephesus. These disciples, who have been baptized “into John’s baptism” (19:3), say that they have never heard of the Holy Spirit. Paul instructs them, baptizes them in the name of Jesus, and lays his hands on them. Then the Holy Spirit comes upon them and they speak in tongues and prophesy (19:6).

The author of Acts probably thought of these two incidents as similar to the one described in chapter 2, although in the latter incidents there is no explicit mention of people recognizing the inspired speech as actual languages.

Speaking in Tongues in 1 Corinthians 12–14

Paul addresses the matter of “speaking in tongues” as a possible problem in the church at Corinth. He acknowledges that the ability to speak in “various kinds of tongues” and the ability to interpret these tongues are spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:10), but he also advises his readers to seek “the higher gifts” (12:31), such as the ability to prophesy (14:1). In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul exalts love as the ultimate aim for all believers, and in 1 Corinthians 14 he gives a number of specific directions about speaking in tongues:

- Speaking in tongues is helpful to the community only when it is used in conjunction with the spiritual gift of “interpretation of tongues” (14:5; cf. 12:10).

- When the community convenes, no more than three should speak in tongues, each in turn, and there must be interpretations given (14:27).

Paul thinks that uncontrolled and uninterpreted speaking in tongues does not edify the community and that it gives outsiders the impression that believers are mad (14:23). Yet he allows this activity to take place, so long as it is done in orderly fashion and is accompanied by interpretation. Paul also encourages the believers to speak in tongues in private; indeed, he claims that he does this himself more than any of them (14:15–18).

Comparison of “Tongues” in Acts and in 1 Corinthians

Interpreters generally note two differences between the phenomenon of speaking in tongues as it is portrayed in Acts and that phenomenon as it is portrayed in 1 Corinthians.

First, the persons who speak in tongues in Acts appear to be miraculously inspired to speak in actual foreign languages that they themselves have never learned. In 1 Corinthians, however, the people speak in incomprehensible languages without any expectation that anyone would recognize their words as an actual language spoken on earth. Indeed, 1 Corinthians 13:1 suggests that the Corinthians might have identified this incomprehensible speech with the language of angels. The interpretation of tongues demanded

a spiritual gift, not mere recognition on the part of one who happened to know the language being spoken.

Second, the people who speak in tongues in Acts are reported as doing so only once, on the occasion of being filled with the Holy Spirit: there is no indication that Peter, Cornelius, or anyone else who speaks in tongues on one occasion ever does so again. In 1 Corinthians, however, those who have the gift of speaking in tongues are able to exercise that gift anytime they choose.