

Why did God choose tongues?

He was a deacon in a fashionable church, but he did not believe in the Pentecostal doctrine relative to the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Yet he had been exposed to that belief through members of his immediate family. One night, at the close of an Evangelistic service in an Apostolic church, he went forward to pray and was overwhelmingly filled with the Spirit of God. He spoke in other tongues fluently and was so inundated in the Spirit that even hours later he could not speak English. Definitely, this was a biblical experience accompanied not only by speaking in another tongue, but also by the joy and peace of the Holy Ghost.

Millions have experienced this same baptism in the Spirit. Wherever this message is proclaimed, the question is asked, "Why did God choose speaking in tongues as the initial, physical evidence of the baptism of the Holy Ghost?" There may be many answers to this question, and perhaps we do not know them all. Several key points are apparent, however.

The Sovereignty of God

First, we must recognize that God is not accountable to us for what He chooses to do. Isaiah asked, "Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding?" (Isaiah 40:13-14). We have no license to question God's ways or to dispute His actions. His purposes are supreme, His promises sure, His performances sane and sensible. The following passages of Scripture, when studied prayerfully with a hungry heart and an open mind, show that there is a definite connection between speaking in tongues and the baptism of the Holy Ghost: Isaiah 28:11-12; Mark 16:17; Acts 2:4; 10:44-46; 19:6; Romans 8:15-16; Galatians 4:6.

Why did God choose blood as the basis for atonement? Why did God choose water as the element in baptism? Why did God choose gold as the overlaying metal for the ark of the covenant? Why did God choose stone as the material upon which to record the Ten Commandments? Why did God choose Jerusalem as the site for the Temple? Why did God choose dust out of which to form mankind? There is divine purpose behind these choices, although we may not understand all the reasons. We certainly cannot deny or disavow God's sovereign right to do as He pleases and to choose what He wishes.

An Immediate, External Evidence

One vital reason why God chose other tongues as the initial sign of receiving the Holy Ghost is that speaking in tongues is an immediate, external evidence. There are many other evidences of the operation of the Spirit of God in a person's life, but it is a matter of time before they are manifest. For example, the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23 follows in the wake of the spiritual infilling.

Peter and the six Jewish Christians who went with him to Caesarea knew that the Gentiles had received the Holy Ghost, not because of longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, or temperance, but because they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God (Acts 10:46). Peter specifically pointed to speaking in tongues as the irrefutable evidence (Acts 10:46-47).

Speaking in tongues is an outward, external evidence, instantly observable and heard. By contrast, peace, joy, righteousness, and spiritual fruit are inward, internal results of the infilling that become evident with the passing of time.

A Uniform Evidence

Another reason why God chose other tongues as the initial sign of receiving the Spirit is that speaking in tongues is a uniform evidence. It applies to everyone, regardless of race, culture, or language.

Some people quote I Corinthians 12:30 in an attempt to prove that not all speak in tongues when they are filled with the Spirit: "Do all speak with tongues?" However, this verse refers to the gift of tongues, that is, speaking a public message in tongues to be interpreted for the congregation, which is a spiritual gift that a person may exercise subsequent to the infilling of the Spirit. Though both tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Ghost and tongues as a later spiritual gift are the same in essence, they are different in administration and operation. For example, the regulations regarding the gift of tongues in I Corinthians 14:27-28 did not apply to the conversion accounts in Acts, where many people spoke in tongues simultaneously, without interpretation, as the sign of being filled with the Spirit.

Some people may question this distinction between the initial use of tongues at the baptism of the Holy Ghost and the later use of tongues as a spiritual gift in a Christian's life. But the same distinction is apparent with regard to faith. To be saved, everyone must have faith (John 3:16; Romans 10:9; Ephesians 2:8). Yet I Corinthians 12:9 reveals that there is a special, supernatural gift of faith that can operate in a Spirit-filled person's life over and beyond the faith necessary for salvation. Saving faith and the spiritual gift of faith are the same in essence but different in administration and operation.

In speaking about the birth of the Spirit, Jesus emphasized the uniformity of the experience: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). Moreover, Jesus placed emphasis upon the accompanying sound, not on sight or feeling. The sound of the wind blowing is evidence of its presence.

Some people conclude that Jesus referred only to "the sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind" on the Day of Pentecost. But this sound of wind is never mentioned again in the later accounts of receiving the Holy Ghost, while speaking in tongues is. Speaking in tongues by itself caused the Jewish Christians to recognize that the experience of the Gentiles at Caesarea was identical to theirs on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 10:44-47; 11:15-17). Hence, the important, conclusive evidence of the Spirit's manifestation at Pentecost was speaking in other tongues. The sound of wind was impersonal, but the speaking was personal. Speaking in tongues was the first evidence of each individual infilling.

At Caesarea all who heard the Word were filled, and all who heard the Word spoke in tongues. If some of them had not spoken in tongues, would the Jewish Christians have accepted their experiences? Clearly not. All twelve men mentioned in Acts 19:6 had a uniform experience. If ten of the twelve had spoken in tongues and the other two had not, would Paul have believed that the two had received the Holy Ghost just as the ten? Certainly not. Paul would not have accepted their experience if they have failed to exhibit the uniform evidence.

A Symbol of Complete Control

Speaking in tongues symbolizes God's complete control of the believer. Perhaps this is one of the strongest reasons why God chose speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Ghost. This symbolism becomes apparent when we study James 3, which provides more information on the tongue than any other chapter in the New Testament.

First, the tongue is capable of defiling the whole body. If so, is it incredible to claim that the tongue is also capable of symbolizing the sanctification of the whole body?

Second, though the tongue is a smaller member, it has never been tamed by humanity. It is the most unruly member of the body. If so, is it not necessary for the tongue to be tamed before the whole body can be consecrated to God? James illustrates the importance of the tongue by comparing it to the bit in a horse's mouth, which gives the rider complete control over the horse, and to the helm of a large ship, which gives the pilot full command of the vessel. In other words, whoever controls the tongue of a person controls him. And a person cannot tame his tongue by himself; only God can tame it for him.

According to Matthew 12:29, before someone can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, he must first bind the strong man. The strong man of our house is the tongue. We can tame every member of the body but this one. When God tames a person's tongue, that person comes under God's full control. He is in the hands of the Almighty. He has been conquered by Christ, endued with a spiritual force from on high, and empowered for God's service.

Humanity's Greatest Expression

The tongue provides the greatest expressions of the human spirit. We humans are spiritual and emotional beings, and as such we must give expression to our emotions. The ability and power to coordinate thought and tongue into intelligent speech is one of our highest prerogatives, elevating us above the beasts of the field. This ability makes us superior to the rest of God's creation on earth, and it is the most distinguishing feature of our being.

The tongue becomes the vehicle of expression for the spirit. All of the emotions--such as love, hate, anger, sorrow, joy, happiness, relief, serenity--are communicated through the tongue. The tongue is the gate way to the heart, feelings, attitudes, and spirit.

Conclusion

In light of these truths, it is not difficult to see why God has chosen speaking in tongues to express the greatest, most wonderful experience that we mortal humans can receive. In the baptism of the Holy Ghost, His Spirit and our spirit become one. He uses our tongue and voice to express this union. It is a wonder of wonders, chosen not by humans, but by God, the sovereign ruler of the universe.

Why fight against Him? Believe His Word, accept what He says, and you too can be baptized with the Holy Ghost, for God will give the Holy Spirit to all who repent and ask in faith (Luke 11:13; Acts 2:38-39).

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