

The Corinthians' Gift of Tongues

By David Wright

On the day of Pentecost (AD 30), Peter and the other apostles were together in a house. Suddenly, a sound “like the rush of a mighty wind” filled the place where they sat, and they “began to speak in other tongues (Acts 2:2, 4). In other words, God miraculously enabled the witnesses of the resurrection to speak fluently in the many native languages of the Jewish visitors who had traveled to Jerusalem for the festival (vs. 5-6).

Many religious people today claim to have the gift of tongues. They point to the Pentecost miracle as a pattern for the modern church. But when pressed, some make a distinction between the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost and the gift of the Spirit experienced by the Corinthians. The apostles, it is argued, spoke in the native languages of their listeners; the Corinthians spoke in heavenly languages known only to God. It is the latter gift that the modern church continues to enjoy.

Support for this position is supposedly found in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence: “For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit” (1 Cor. 14:2). Was Paul suggesting that the Spirit gave some early Christians the miraculous power to speak gibberish? If we understand that the apostle was here correcting the Corinthians’ abuse of tongues (e.g., speaking to the church in languages foreign to the listeners present), the true meaning of this verse becomes more clear. Paul was saying that when someone addresses an assembly in a foreign language, the church receives no benefit. We may paraphrase the verse this way: For one who speaks in a language foreign to his audience speaks not to men but only to God; for no one present understands him.

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