Speaking in Tongues and the So-Called Heavenly Language: A Biblical Examination

The phenomenon of speaking in tongues is a controversial topic within the Christian faith. Many Charismatic and Pentecostal believers view it as a heavenly language—a sign of spiritual power and a direct manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Some even teach that speaking in tongues is a necessary sign of being baptized in the Spirit. But is this understanding biblical? Does the Bible support the idea of a "heavenly language" spoken by believers? And more importantly, is every spiritual manifestation truly of God?

To answer these questions, we will explore what Scripture says about tongues—what it is, what it is not, and whether modern claims align with the biblical record.

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1. The First Appearance of Tongues – Known Human Languages (Acts 2)

The first clear instance of speaking in tongues occurs at Pentecost:

> *"And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Acts 2:4)*

These tongues were **not unknown or spiritual languages**, but real, recognizable **human languages**:

> *"And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?" (Acts 2:8)*

This passage shows that the biblical gift of tongues, at least in its first expression, was the miraculous ability to speak in **foreign earthly languages** without having studied them. This served the purpose of **communicating the gospel across language barriers**.

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2. The Corinthian Church – A Different Kind of Tongue? (1 Corinthians 12–14)

In Paul's letters to the Corinthians, we find a different scenario. Paul discusses **unknown tongues** that were spoken during worship, which were not understood by others:

> *"For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries." (1 Corinthians 14:2)*

Some interpret this to mean a **heavenly or spiritual language**, especially since Paul says the speaker is addressing God and not men. However, this does not necessarily mean it is an angelic or divine tongue. The key point is that the language is *unintelligible to others*, and therefore must be **interpreted** to edify the church:

> *"I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied…except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying." (1 Corinthians 14:5)*

Thus, while Paul acknowledges a kind of "unknown tongue," he places strong emphasis on **order, understanding, and interpretation** in the church gathering:

> *"Let all things be done decently and in order." (1 Corinthians 14:40)*

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3. “Tongues of Angels”? – A Misunderstood Phrase (1 Corinthians 13:1)

One verse frequently cited in support of a “heavenly language” is:

> *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” (1 Corinthians 13:1)*

Some argue that Paul is saying believers may speak in angelic languages. However, this is clearly **hyperbolic language**, used to stress the **supremacy of love (charity)**. Paul is not teaching doctrine here but using exaggeration to make a point—just as he says in the next verse that he could “remove mountains” with faith, yet we know that’s metaphorical.

There is **no scriptural evidence** that any believer actually spoke the language of angels, and no example in Scripture where angels spoke in a tongue that required interpretation.

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4. Is Every Spiritual Tongue from God?

Many modern churches claim that tongues spoken today are always of God. However, Scripture warns **not to assume this**. The Bible calls believers to test all spiritual experiences.

Try the Spirits – 1 John 4:1

> *“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”*

This is a clear command. Just because someone speaks in tongues or performs miracles does not mean it's from the Holy Spirit. We must test whether it aligns with God's Word.

Satan Can Perform Lying Signs – 2 Thessalonians 2:9–10

> *"Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders…"*

Paul warns that Satan can perform counterfeit signs and wonders. Not everything supernatural is divine.

Jesus' Warning – Matthew 7:22–23

> *"Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?*
> *And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."*

These people experienced what seemed to be genuine spiritual gifts—but Jesus says, "I never knew you." Even **miraculous experiences can be counterfeit** if the person is not truly following Christ.

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5. Disorderly Tongues – A Mark of Confusion, Not the Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:23, 33)

In many Charismatic services today, everyone speaks in tongues at once, often with no interpretation. Paul directly addresses this kind of confusion:

> *"If therefore the whole church be come together into one*

> *place, and all speak with tongues… will they not say that ye are mad?" (1 Corinthians 14:23)*

And he reminds them:

> *"For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints." (1 Corinthians 14:33)*

Such disorder and lack of interpretation **violate the biblical guidelines** for the use of tongues in worship.

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6. Are Tongues Required for All Believers?

Another false claim is that **every believer must speak in tongues** to prove they have the Holy Spirit. But Paul clearly says:

> *"Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?" (1 Corinthians 12:30)*

The implied answer is "No." Tongues are **one** of many spiritual gifts, and **not everyone receives it**.

□ Key Takeaways

Claim or Practice	Biblical?	Explanation
Tongues as known languages (Acts 2)	□ Yes	Clearly demonstrated at Pentecost
Tongues as unknown (1 Corinthians 14)	□ Yes	Requires interpretation, must edify

Claim or Practice	Biblical?	Explanation
Tongues as angelic or heavenly language	❌ No	Based only on poetic language, not doctrine
Tongues as proof of Spirit baptism	❌ No	Not all believers speak in tongues (1 Cor 12:30)
All tongues today are from God	❌ No	Must be tested (1 John 4:1); some are false
Speaking in tongues without order or interpretation	❌ No	Paul condemns confusion in worship (1 Cor 14:23, 33)

Conclusion: A Biblical Lens on Tongues

Speaking in tongues is a real spiritual gift described in the New Testament, but its biblical use differs significantly from how it is often practiced today. The first occurrence of tongues was the supernatural speaking of foreign human languages for the purpose of spreading the gospel. Later, Paul addressed a form of unknown tongues in Corinth, but with strict instructions: it must be interpreted, it must edify the church, and it must be orderly.

The Bible nowhere teaches that tongues are always a “heavenly language,” nor does it say they are the necessary sign of the Holy Spirit. Even more seriously, Scripture warns of **false signs, spiritual deception, and counterfeit manifestations**—meaning not all spiritual experiences are from God.

As believers, we are called to test the spirits, study the Word diligently, and seek spiritual gifts that edify the body of Christ in love and truth. Emotional experiences and supernatural signs should never replace sound doctrine, spiritual discernment, and obedience to Christ.

“Let all things be done decently and in order.” (1 Corinthians 14:40)
