

What Every Last-Days Pentecostal Needs to Know About Speaking in Tongues

The Sunday which occurs seven weeks after Easter is celebrated in the Christian Church as Pentecost Sunday. It coincides with the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, which was observed in Jewish worship 50 days after their Feast of Passover.

As recorded in the opening verses of the book of the Acts, after His resurrection from the tomb and before His ascension to heaven, Jesus “presented Himself alive ... by many infallible proofs, appearing to them for forty days, and speaking concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

He went on to command the disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what He had told them about the Father’s promise to send the Holy Spirit to them. He explained that just as John had baptized followers in water, they would be “baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5).

Jesus went on to explain, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Chapter 2 narrates the sights and sounds which happened supernaturally to the 120 disciples present together on the day of Pentecost. “A sound like a mighty rushing wind came from heaven” and “tongues as of fire” appeared to them and separated apart to rest of each one (Acts 2:2).

“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to speak” (Acts 2:4).

The crowds of devout Jews from Jerusalem and visiting Jews and proselytes from many nations, who were there for the Feast, came together to see what was happening. They were motivated because they heard “them speaking in our own languages the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11).

They were all amazed and perplexed. Some questioned the meaning of this supernatural happening, asking, “What does this mean?” Others mocked, saying, “These men are full of new wine” (see Acts 2:12-13).

Peter stood among the other apostles and defended the speakers as not being drunk since it was too early in the morning! Rather, this transformed fisherman proclaimed these sights and sounds were a fulfillment of prophecy by the Prophet Joel (2:28-29) for the last days.

“‘In the last days it shall be,’ says God, ‘that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even on My menservants and maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy’” (Acts 2:17-18; ref. Joel 2:28-29).

Interestingly, this same Old Testament prophetic source (Joel) continued past the Day-of-Pentecost fulfillment to identify events yet to happen before the end-times judgment (the period, known as the Day of the Lord) shall come.

“And I will show wonders in heaven above and signs on the earth below: blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and glorious day of the Lord comes. And whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:19-20; ref. Joel 2:30-31).

Joel’s prophecy pegs the “last days” as extending from the fulfillment the Holy Spirit being poured out on young and old (as at Pentecost) through a future judgment period known as

the Day of the Lord (just prior to our Jesus' second coming).

Throughout the early church, as recorded in the book of Acts, each time the baptism with the Holy Spirit was experienced, the explicit or implicit confirmation was that the recipient worshipped and glorified God in unlearned languages (Acts 2, 8, 10, 11 and 19).

Today, when Pentecostals or Charismatics talk about "tongues" they are referencing unlearned sounds and syllables in a "prayer language" to speak to God. These are "groanings" from deep within the praying Christian. They are expressed privately to God and are to be understood and appreciated only by God.

For he who speaks in an unknown tongue does not speak to men, but to God. For no one understands him, although in the spirit, he speaks mysteries (1 Cor. 14:2).

Paul taught when Christians engage in such private prayers, the Holy Spirit actually "intercedes" or prays through them. This Spirit-assisted "prayer language" allows praise to the Father, carrying the Christian's unarticulated emotions and needs to Father God.

"Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:26-27).

Thus, praying in tongues is a personal, spiritual release and prayer to God in an unlearned language. It is not meant for private understanding or instruction and it is not meant to add "edification, exhortation and consolation" to the church, as prophecy is (1 Cor. 14:3).

When we pray in this unlearned, prayer language, the Spirit

within seems to put our prayers into “overdrive.” There is edifying ease which is felt and a sense of fulfillment experienced in our prayerful efforts (1 Cor. 14:4).

It is a deep yearning for God that is too deep for our rational language and cannot carry the weight of our expansive love of Christ. Some new, ecstatic way of expressing our love and praise is required.

Paul writes simply about it: “For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful” (1 Cor. 14:14).

Using our spiritual language, privately, in prayer to God, on a regular basis is appropriate and desirable. It edifies or builds us up spiritually. Paul said, “I thank my God that I speak in tongues more than you all” (1 Cor. 14:18)

Furthermore, speaking in tongues may occur in a public service, with some restrictions, when a spiritually gifted individual (1 Cor. 12:7-11) senses they have a special message from God “for the edification of the Church” (1 Cor. 14:12).

However, that individual must be able to interpret the heavenly intent of the message in tongues in the common language of the people (14:12-13) or wait until such a spiritually gifted companion is present.

Paul says: “If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at the most three, and each one in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. ... For God is not of disorder but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:27-28, 33).

Earlier, we noted that Peter’s defining sermon on the Day of Pentecost included Joel’s full prediction, not just the explanation concerning what was happening before their eyes and ears. Under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, both Joel and Peter linked the delightful Day of Pentecost with the

dreadful Day of the Lord.

I suggest that, as “last-days Pentecostals,” who increasingly believe the times of the Gentiles are being fulfilled (Luke 21:24), and “wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead—Jesus, who delivered us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10),” all believers (both Messianic and Gentile) need to follow the apostle Paul’s admonitions in 1 Cor. 14:1. That passage says: “Follow after love and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.”

As Spirit-filled believers, acknowledging and celebrating the Gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit this Pentecost Sunday, let us redouble our commitment to Spirit-assisted living and practices:

“Therefore, brothers, eagerly desire to prophesy and do not forbid speaking in tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:39-40). {eoa}

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