

A Fresh Look at Initial Evidence:

# A Functional Approach to a Sometimes Touchy Subject

By Tim Enloe

In his classic book, *They Speak With Other Tongues*, John Sherrill observes, "Tongues make people fight."<sup>1</sup>

Even those who first heard the 120 speaking in tongues on the Day of Pentecost formed divided opinions. Some were amazed and perplexed while others suggested a 12-step program for the apparent outbreak of early-morning alcoholism.

Throughout history people have both ridiculed and venerated tongues speakers. In the first three centuries of church history, the Montanist group, theologian Tertullian, Bishop Irenaeus, Elder Novation, and historian Eusebius either experienced or mentioned the practice of this supernatural gift. Even 300 years after Pentecost, tongues were still controversial.<sup>2</sup>

Though St. Augustine and Origen seem to be the earliest cessationists, the phenomenon of tongues continued. From 1100–1500 more notable tongues speakers entered the scene: Abbess Hildegard, who transcribed some 900 of her unknown words in *Lingua Ignota*, while Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit monks all wrote about their spiritual language.<sup>3</sup> The tongues-speaking French Camisards influenced John Wesley in the 1700s, stirring him to make favorable comments about the Montanists.<sup>4</sup> Notable in the 1800s, British Presbyterian Pastor Edward Irving revived public interest in this gift with his tongues as the "standing sign" doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

Though history displays a consistent expression of miraculous spiritual gifts through the ensuing centuries (including tongues speaking), many look to one man as the father of the modern Pentecostal movement: Charles F. Parham. Historically speaking, Parham's lasting doctrinal contribution was his connection of tongues speech as the sign — or as he coined it the "Bible evidence"<sup>6</sup> of Spirit baptism. He did not have any problem with the modern expression of tongues; he was trying to fit the phenomenon into a theological framework by asking, "What function do tongues serve?"

Parham believed he had rediscovered the apostolic doctrine of tongues

speech as the confirming sign of Spirit baptism. Though Parham's leadership influence in the Pentecostal revival was brief, and many of his unique doctrines forgotten,<sup>7</sup> his "Bible evidence" doctrine left an indelible mark on the burgeoning movement's theology and practice.<sup>8</sup>

Today, tongues still seem to be controversial. Modern critics of the Pentecostal movement typically do not have problems with our evangelism efforts, open worship style, or missions programs; the problem lies with our seemingly pesky initial evidence doctrine. Perhaps it is the only thing standing in the way of our being identical twins to our evangelical brothers. Is it really worth the potential misunderstanding to cling to such a historically hot-button belief?

I am a thirty-something Pentecostal minister and I believe it is. Not for the sake of toeing the company line, not for the sake of hanging onto yesterday's archaic traditions, but because I am firmly convinced it is biblical to expect tongues speaking as the outward confirming sign of Spirit baptism, and afterward, as a viable expression of spiritual life.

I often interact with younger ministers and ministry students. Some people may be alarmed at their transparency in honestly questioning initial evidence, but I am encouraged because I have yet to find a questioner who was not sincere in his or her search for biblical accuracy.

This generation of leaders needs to explore and arrive at their own conclusions. They do not blindly accept the position handed down as unchallengeable *ex cathedra*. The good news is there is a significant weight of biblical data to support the expectation of tongues speaking as the universal sign of Spirit baptism and as a mystically freeing expression of worship and prayer afterward.

In this article I will explore several practical angles for understanding and teaching about expecting tongues as the outward confirming sign of Spirit baptism. I will first look at some terminology, then see how tongues fit into the big picture of Scripture, then move onto a functional, prophetic dimension of tongues — reexamining the reason why we need Spirit baptism. The composite image, I hope, will bring a fresh perspective to the topic and perhaps offer some different, usable teaching angles.

## **TERMINOLOGY**

We often describe the Pentecostal experience as "the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the initial physical evidence of speaking in other tongues." For simplicity, I will use the title: *Spirit baptism*. This distills

the essence into two biblically defensible words and easily aligns with the other elementary Christian discipleship experience of water baptism.

## **Tongues**

Just hearing the word *tongues* sets some people on edge. We do not have the luxury of assuming that speaking in tongues is a desirable or positive concept for everyone. Because of the confusion, and depending on the audience, I frequently choose to use different terminology when speaking on the subject. For example, I commonly use the term *supernatural language* with adults or youth.

I am not advocating a bait-and-switch tactic; that would be dishonest. After all, *tongues* is the biblically accurate word used in all of our possible teaching texts. I am advocating being sensitively creative to help reframe the concept in a fresh way.

## **Initial physical evidence**

Although I possess no theological concerns with the term *initial physical evidence*, I believe it has at least three distinct hurdles to overcome: one for the outsider, one for the insider, and one for the present cultural context.

This terminology carries historic baggage for those outside the Pentecostal tradition. They often think we do not appreciate the authenticity of their spirituality because they reject one of our core beliefs. For those inside, tongues has frequently been a source of spiritual pride and false elitism. Unfortunate for everyone is the potential exclusivist notion we intentionally portray or they unintentionally perceive that separates brothers into categories of the “haves” and the “have-nots.” We need to avoid this division while sensitively enabling others to come into their biblical inheritance of supernatural power. Approach is always critical — both for the outsider and the insider — and once again we must be cautious that we are motivated by love and humility.

Perhaps we should reexamine this terminology in practical settings. To a modern church attendee, initial physical evidence sounds like something a district attorney would present to win a conviction or part of the storyline on a CSI episode. The perceived association with criminal investigation and prosecution cannot be helpful. I am not advocating that theologians rewrite their texts or amend their glossaries to conform to pop culture, but I believe our day-to-day teaching/preaching ministries could benefit from clearer, simpler language that contains a stronger missional connotation.

I have generally preferred outward confirming sign to initial physical evidence, but have chosen to adopt a description — prophetic confirmation — for reasons I will discuss later. Whatever our personal choice, I encourage pastors to revisit and reevaluate the effectiveness of their semantics. What others may hear may not be what we actually mean.

Let us look to some ideas relating to our biblical ideology of the sign of Spirit baptism.

## **HOW TONGUES FIT INTO THE BIG PICTURE**

Did tongues speaking suddenly show up out of nowhere? Is the Book of Acts our only basis for understanding and teaching on the subject?

A brief survey of the Acts accounts reveals that speaking in tongues is the biblically mentioned sign in the three detailed accounts (Acts 2,10,19) and is the most likely sign in the two nondetailed accounts (Acts 8, 9) as well. The only consistently repeated sign of Spirit baptism in Acts is tongues speaking; any other conclusion is synthetic. But what about the bigger picture?

I have discovered that presenting a broader biblical context than merely presenting the Acts narratives enables people to see the subject in a more personally imperative light. The more Scripture we use, the more hunger we will generate. Along these lines, the following concepts offer some teaching angles to consider.

### **Two common stages in biblical Spirit-empowering narratives**

Looking at what people experienced in other biblical Spirit-empowering events helps us frame a broader context for Spirit baptism. What happened to people when the Holy Spirit came upon them before the Day of Pentecost?

The overwhelming response to the Spirit's empowering in the Old Testament was spontaneous prophecy in the speaker's native language. In fact, these occurrences frequently displayed a two-stage process:

1. The Holy Spirit came upon the person, and
  2. The person gave witness with sudden prophetic speech.
- Examples of this common two-stage pattern include: Numbers 11:25; 1 Samuel 10:6,10; 1 Samuel 19:20; 2 Samuel 23:1,2; 1 Chronicles 12:18; 2 Chronicles 15:1–7; 20:14–17; 24:20; Isaiah 59:21; 61:1; Ezekiel 2:1–7; Joel 2:28,29; Matthew 12:18; Luke 1:67–79; 4:14,15; Acts 1:8; 2:4; 10:44,45; 19:6.

These two common stages follow through to the New Testament fulfillment of both Moses' desire (Numbers 11:29) and the direct oracle from God (Joel 2:28,29) that first, the Holy Spirit would one day come upon all of God's people, and second they would give prophetic witness.

Even Jesus reiterated this theme when He prophesied that the Holy Spirit would first come upon believers; and, second, He would empower them as vocal witnesses (Acts 1:8).

### **Prophetic commissioning motif**

The major Old Testament prophets had distinct moments of prophetic commissioning. Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, Ezekiel 1, and Daniel 10 are examples. Four similarities are apparent in these narratives:

1. Heard divinely inspired sounds,
2. Saw divinely inspired sights,
3. Felt divinely inspired sensation, and
4. Spoke divinely inspired speech.

Isaiah first saw the Lord (6:1), heard angelic speech (verse 3), then felt the hot coal on his lips (verses 6,7), and finally spoke divinely inspired words (verses 9ff). Jeremiah first heard (1:4), then felt the hand of the Lord touch his lips (verse 9), then saw (verse 11), and began to speak (verse 7). Ezekiel saw the vision (1:1-24), heard the voice (verse 25), felt supernatural sensation (2:2; 3:2), and last spoke Spirit-inspired words (3:11ff). Likewise Daniel first saw (10:5ff), then felt (verses 8-10), then heard (verse 9), then spoke (verse 16).

The Acts 2 account follows this motif point by point. The first Pentecostals first heard a sound of wind from heaven (verse 2), and then saw the appearance of fire (verse 3). They most likely felt the Holy Spirit's presence as this divine fire both physically sat on each one of them, and they were personally filled (verses 3,4). No wonder they proceeded to speak Spirit-inspired words (verse 4). They were experiencing a textbook case of prophetic commissioning; only this time it was not for a unique individual, but a democratization of prophetic experience and power. New phenomena marked this new, universal dimension of prophetic availability: prophecy in an unlearned language.

A practical ministry note: When I teach on the subject of tongues, I often use this functional approach to lay the groundwork for Spirit-inspired speech being the biblically consistent response to the Holy Spirit's empowering. By doing this I frame this expectation in a much

broader context and make the personalization of tongues speech easier for many to accept.

### **Apostolic recognition**

As a final dimension of the big picture, let us look at how the apostles viewed tongues, not just the accounts of the actual receiving.

In Acts 10, Peter responds to the glossolalia of the Caesarean Gentiles. With his companions, he shares amazement that the Spirit had been poured out on these outsiders in identical fashion to the original Jews at Pentecost (verses 45–47). Peter recognized Spirit baptism by the demonstration of tongues.

Examine the usage of the pronoun “we” in verse 47. It speaks not to the Acts 2 participants only; the “we” also addressed the Jews from Joppa who came with Peter (verses 23,45–47). The Joppa believers had also experienced Spirit baptism, and tongues had attested their Spirit baptism as well.

While relating the Gentile Pentecost to the other apostles in Jerusalem, Peter again used the pronoun “we,” but this time he is speaking to his comrades from the original Pentecost: “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’ ” (Acts 11:15,16).<sup>9</sup>

Peter used the experience of tongues to confirm that Spirit baptism had occurred for the Gentiles. This was also the sign that convinced the other apostles of the Gentiles’ conversion and subsequent Spirit empowering:

“ ‘Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?’ When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life’ ” (verses 17,18).

It is indisputable. The apostles saw tongues as confirmation of Spirit baptism. In Acts 15:8,9 Peter again recounts this event using the same reasoning.

After circling the terminology and bigger picture, we are left with the issue of implementation.

## A FUNCTIONAL, PROPHETIC ASPECT

Since tongues is a form of prophetic speech, we need to reflect on how the expression of this phenomena stirs us with courage to minister. The two-stage pattern mentioned before reminds us that, when the Spirit empowers us, we can do things we cannot normally do by ourselves. How does this sign stir our confidence to action?

### A little Greek

Luke's usage of the peculiar Greek verb *apophthengomai* — which is translated "utterance" in Acts 2:4, and Palma notes "is used in the Septuagint for supernaturally inspired speech"<sup>10</sup> — sheds light on his anticipation of converting experience into practice. Not only did Luke use this word in Acts 2:4 to describe the Holy Spirit's activity in prompting words in tongues, but he also created a conceptual bridge for the original Greek reader when he used the same verb to describe Peter's speech to the crowd in the known language (verse 14). Luke shows that the same Holy Spirit guided both events of speaking — one in tongues and one in known language. So practically, if we can trust God to guide our speech in the supernatural tongue, how much more should we trust him to guide our English to minister to others.

This is where my preferred terminology comes into play. I believe tongues serve as *prophetic confirmation* of Spirit baptism. When someone starts to speak in tongues, it confirms he can speak God-directed words; it is a biblical, prophetic commissioning that can be translated into supernatural, verbal ministry in his native tongue.

I value tongues as the first outward sign and also as an ongoing blessing. But in the big picture, I believe tongues lend confidence to minister. Spirit baptism is not a totally new event scripturally, but rather a greater fulfillment and a democratization of previous prophetic empowerings "upon all flesh."

This fact should affect how we present Spirit baptism to those we lead. If our motivation for teaching on Spirit baptism is counting recipients for our Annual Church Ministries Report, our local ministry context only suffers. When we frame our teaching about Spirit baptism in a missional way, we stir expectancy to minister with this new power. We all have unsaved people in our lives who need to hear a word from the Lord. Spirit baptism and the confirming sign of speaking in tongues lead to active prophetic witnessing.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Having discussed the terminology, big picture, and functional

considerations, a few final warnings are in order for modern practitioners of Pentecost.

First, Spirit baptism provides supernatural ministry power. Therefore, the confirmational experience of tongues speaking should inspire spiritual confidence to minister. Unfortunately, we Pentecostals often seem to struggle with spiritual pride and elitism along with our experience; but power, not division, should be the outcome.

To constantly keep the true purpose of Spirit baptism in focus, we need to personally practice Spirit-inspired, prophetic witnessing when we are off the clergy clock. Only then can we authentically inspire our people to freely give away what they have freely received. I believe this is the ultimate solution to the problem of those we lead being filled and then not implementing Spirit-inspired ministry afterward; we must lead them — not only in theory but also in practice.

Second, the fact some have yet to experience the confirming sign of tongues does not invalidate their other spiritual experiences. For a Pentecostal to look down on the real, supernatural encounters of others simply because they have not spoken in tongues is tragic. This demonstrates how much we need to consistently humble ourselves and welcome the fruit of the Spirit to grow in our lives.

Perhaps a fresh read-through of Acts 10 would remind us how blinding our prejudices can be. We must never forget that believers had some level of supernatural ministry prior to Spirit baptism. This is shown in Christ's ministry commissionings, first to the Twelve, and then to the 70 He sent out two by two.

Finally, we must be careful to never view the concept of evidential tongues as a theological argument. I can only wonder why initial evidence is not propositionally stated in Scripture. Perhaps it is to keep us from pursuing the sign over the actual gift. Tongues speaking is not the point of Spirit baptism; prophetic ministry is. Our approach needs to set the expectation beyond the initial sign, setting a fuller context in which people can experience Jesus as their Baptizer in the Holy Spirit and then becoming the Spirit-empowered witnesses He indicated: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Tongues is indeed the prophetic confirmation, the initial physical evidence, and outward confirming sign of Spirit baptism. But the actual gift is the supernatural, prophetic power of God's Spirit that the

world desperately needs. Let us enable others into this amazing experience.



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## Notes

1. John Sherrill, *They Speak With Other Tongues* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Spire Books, 1964).
2. See Ronald A.N. Kydd's work, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson) for more discussion and details.
3. Notables include: Antony of Padua who was Franciscan, Vincent Ferrer who was Dominican, and Francis Xavier who was a Jesuit.
4. Leslie Thomas Holdcroft, *The Holy Spirit: A Pentecostal Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Abbotsford, B.C. Canada: CeeTec Publishing, 1999). Holdcroft uses Kydd as a primary source.
5. See David W. Dorrie, "Edward Irving and the 'Standing Sign' of Spirit Baptism" in *Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspectives on the Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism*, ed. Gary McGee, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2007).
6. Charles F. Parham, *Kol Kare Bomidbar: A Voice Crying In the Wilderness*. (Kansas City: Private, 1902), 25–38.
7. Parham concluded that the specific language of tongues exhibited by a person should be identified as a known, presently spoken language, and this identification would direct the person to his foreign mission field. If he spoke Chinese, God was calling and equipping the person to minister to the Chinese in their native tongue. Several failed experiments quickly proved this conclusion false.
8. Many early leaders in the Pentecostal movement would experience Spirit baptism under Parham's ministry, including: Howard Goss, Marie

Burgess Brown, Eli Richey, F.F. Bosworth, and John G. Lake — not to mention the global impact of his independently thinking protégé, William Seymour, and the Azusa Street revival which would carry the rediscovered “Bible evidence” teaching to international prominence.

9. Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission (www.Lockman.org).

10. Anthony D. Palma, *The Holy Spirit: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 2001), 141.