

We don't typically discuss the phenomenon of speaking in tongues in the Lutheran Church. However, the New Testament talks about speaking in tongues at places such as Pentecost, a couple other places in the book of Acts, and in several places in 1 Corinthians. In the end of Mark, Jesus promises that those who follow Him will cast out demons, speak in new tongues, touch poisonous serpents and live, and heal the sick.

What do these signs in the early church have to do with Christ's church today? An entire denomination of Christians, namely, the Pentecostal church, teaches that speaking in tongues is evidence of the Holy Spirit entering the heart of a believer. They teach that these tongues are angelic tongues that no human language mirrors. Maybe some of you even had a friend who questioned the authenticity of your faith because you couldn't speak in tongues.

Believe it or not, in the 70s and 80s, this emphasis on speaking in tongues was promoted in some circles in our church body, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Certain Lutherans also believed that speaking in angelic tongues was part of following Jesus Christ.

What is a Christian to do when reading a passage like this from 1 Corinthians. Paul writes about speaking in tongues. Maybe I should take up this practice myself?

I'll avoid any cliffhangers to say that the Bible teaches that speaking in tongues is not speaking in angelic languages, but the miraculous ability to speak known languages by the power of the Holy Spirit. This miracle has faded away since the early church. Those who claim that to be a true Christian you have to speak in tongues are sadly mistaken. But language still divides in our modern church. Today we learn: THE HOLY SPIRIT UNITES EVERY TRIBE, TONGUE, AND PEOPLE IN CHRIST'S CHURCH.

First, I. Sin divides us into our own languages. The Bible teaches that at the beginning, **“the whole earth had one language and the same words.”** However, sinful humanity used this gift of unity to rebel against God. **“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.’** At the Tower of Babel, the people sought to work together to serve themselves rather than God. As a result, the Lord scattered them across the face of the Earth giving them their own languages.

The history of the world as such is that of fragmented communities, with a multitude of people groups, languages, and ethnicities. Today, linguists guess there are about 7,000 spoken languages. This is a beautiful thing as the diversity across our world and our communities can show the many wonders of God's creation. However, it can lead to hatred and animosity.

Today, we observe a kind of Tower of Babel. The Superbowl is the biggest sporting event in the United States with the one-day event generating over a billion dollars in revenue. People from many countries, languages, and ethnicities gather to celebrate this event. Certainly this is a special event, and I think very few of us would turn down free tickets to attend this remarkable event—even if the Packers or Vikings aren't playing.

But it has a dark underside. Many experts guess that the Super Bowl is where the most human trafficking takes place in a single day as some of the high rollers who attend this event have no concerns paying to sleep with someone who isn't his wife. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration states that drunk driving incidents increase 40% on Super Bowl Sunday. Not all parties are good.

Sin divides, and we see that as a result of sin, humanity speaks different languages. This could look like actual literal different languages, but it also can look like the divisions that occur in different fandoms. Eagles and Chiefs fans aren't friends today, and how else are we already divided against people in our neighborhoods and communities over issues more serious than what colors you're rooting for this afternoon?

We see pride lies at the root of these issues, and pride was a problem that Paul sought to tackle in the church of Corinth. Throughout this passage in 1 Corinthians 14, he is at pains to let people know that this gift of speaking in tongues is not for making oneself look good, but for helping teach and build up in the Church. The Christian boasting in his supposed ability to speak in angelic tongues is not proclaiming Christ, but selfishly boasting in his own abilities and gifts.

We see sin divides, but II. The Holy Spirit unites people of different backgrounds. Jesus, speaking of His death on the cross said, “**And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.**” Jesus came to be the savior of every tongue, tribe, and people. In the cross the world gathers to receive forgiveness.

It comes as no surprise that Jesus ministered to people outside of the nation of Israel: the Syrophenician woman, the Centurion, and the Samaritan woman. At His death, a centurion cried out, “**Truly this was the Son of God!**”

One thing we can say positive about the Pentecostal denomination is that Pentecost was an amazing day in the history of the Church. Perhaps we downplay the Festival of Pentecost in our own Church body.

But what an amazing thing! The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples so that they could speak in tongues, that is, different languages. The Holy Spirit overcame the curse of Babel so that people from all over the known world could hear the

Good News of Jesus Christ who died for sinners and forgives our sins that we would no longer be divided, but united in Christ.

This is the concern Paul has when he writes this chapter of 1 Corinthians. **“Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”** It’s more important to use your gifts to build others up than to use the gift of tongues to impress and wow people.

Nowadays, the Holy Spirit prefers not to use the miraculous gift of tongues to unite people, but He uses the gift of translators to help translate the Bible and other texts into different languages so that many people may understand and come to faith in Christ.

Nowadays, the Holy Spirit uses ordinary means to do extraordinary things. He still works through the Word to change hearts. The Bible has been translated into 756 languages with smaller portions being translated into thousands of languages. The Lutheran Heritage Foundation has worked to translate Lutheran materials such as Luther’s Small Catechism into dozens of languages. The Holy Spirit is working to do extraordinary things through the written and preached Word.

The Holy Spirit is working to deliver the forgiveness of Calvary to you even today as He comes to us also through the sacrament of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper to deliver to us His many gifts.

In giving us the Church, He gives us a community that transcends language, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The vision in Revelation is **“a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,”** Our community is bigger than our human, worldly ties of similar backgrounds and stories.

So we see, III. The phenomenon of tongues was a temporary outpouring to unite beyond divided languages. In the last chapter Paul writes, **“Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.”** The miraculous ability to speak different languages was a temporary gift that the Holy Spirit gave to jump start His Church in new places. The gift that we can give to those around us now is not miracles or supernatural talents, but the gift of love delivered to us by the means of grace empowered by the Holy Spirit.

You don’t need to speak in tongues like some Christian friends may claim. You simply need to hear God’s Word, and the Holy Spirit will do the rest to welcome others to this wonderful gift that we call the Church. Amen!