

[HOME](#)[PREVIOUS](#)[NEXT](#)[SEARCH](#)[COPYRIGHT](#)

Biblical Tongues: Their Nature and Duration

Cessation of Tongues

Since the cessation of Biblical tongues is entirely independent of the coming of “that which is perfect” in 1 Corinthians 13:10, and receives no hint anywhere else in the New Testament, attempts to identify the “perfect” entity are wholly superfluous; it remains merely to be seen if the history of Christianity subsequent to the New Testament can identify the timing of that cessation. Similarly, for example, the Old Testament does not name the individual whom Isaiah describes: “the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:6); but post-Old Testament literature, *viz.*, the New Testament, identifies him as Jesus (John 1:29). To that end, therefore, this section cites pertinent, post-New Testament, Christian documents.

The anonymous *Didache*, or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, variously dated between 80 and 180, writes in detail about regulating prophets, with one section in particular that could be construed to apply to speaking in tongues:

And every prophet that speaketh in the Spirit ye shall neither try nor judge; for every sin shall be forgiven, but this sin shall not be forgiven. But not every one that speaketh in the Spirit is a prophet; but only if he hold the ways of the Lord. Therefore from their ways shall the false prophet and the prophet be known [*Teaching of the Twelve*, 11:7,8].

The association of speaking “in the spirit” exclusively with prophets, constitutes either an explicit declaration that the hearers of the utterances understood the utterances without the need to translate them, or that very soon after the New Testament was written, the word “prophet” had acquired a meaning different from its use in the New Testament, to comprise also individuals who spoke in foreign languages that they did not understand. In either case, however, comprehending the speaking was required in order to verify the veracity of the prophets; remarkably, the *Didache* condemns false prophets as guilty of the unpardonable sin (Matthew 12:31,32). Thus if the passage refers at all to tongues, these are previously unknown foreign languages constituting the Biblical gift of tongues, *not* ecstatic, un-Biblical gibberish.

Irenaeus, 125–202, wrote of

many brethren in the Church, who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages [*Against Heresies*], Book V, vi, 1].

Irenaeus thus was acquainted with a manifestation of tongues; however, the word “language” itself conveys little information whether these tongues were the Biblical gift of speaking foreign languages, or un-Biblical babbling. “Languages” translates *glossa*, allowing either possibility: “no inference can be fairly drawn as to the nature of it from his words” (Edwards, p. 319). But that Irenaeus accepted them, and that the Christian community in turn accepted Irenaeus, argue that the languages were the Biblical gift of speaking previously unlearned foreign languages, that they were *not* ecstatic gibberish, and that this gift was still operative during Irenaeus’ lifetime.

The Shepherd of Hermas, written about 160, was “a mild protest against” (Coxe) the movement known both as Montanism and as Phrygianism:

And first, try the man who hath the spirit of God When, therefore, a man who hath the spirit of God shall come into the church of the righteous, who hath the faith of God, and they pray unto the Lord; then the holy angel of God fills that man with the Blessed Spirit, and he speaks in the congregation as he is moved of God. Thus, therefore, is the spirit of God known, because whosoever speaketh by the spirit of God, speaketh as the Lord will [*Hermas*, Book II, 11, ii; *Wake*, p. 245].

This document shows that speaking in a congregation as a manifestation of being filled with the

Holy Spirit, was still a recognized phenomenon in the few years immediately following the writing of the New Testament. Speaking “by the spirit of God” is sufficiently ambiguous as to encompass both prophesying and speaking in tongues. That the contemporary Christian community accepted this document, strongly suggests that these tongues were Biblical, foreign languages, not ecstatic gibberish. The exhortation to “try the man who hath the spirit of God” requires examining the life of that person, presumably therefore including comprehending the words that the individual was wont to speak.

In 156, one Montanus “proclaimed himself the passive instrument through whom the Holy Spirit spoke,” thereby initiating “the dispensation of the Holy Spirit.” Two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, joined him; these three then

affirmed, as mouthpieces of the Spirit, that the end of the world was at hand, and that the heavenly Jerusalem was about to be established in Phrygia [an inland province in Asia Minor, now Turkey], whither believers should betake themselves. In preparation for the fast-approaching consummation the most strenuous asceticism should be practised, celibacy, fastings, and abstinence from meat [[Walker](#), p. 56].

Tertullian, ca. 160–230, associated himself with this movement and became “the most eminent Montanist” ([Walker](#), p. 56); he asserted that “signs of spiritual gifts” and speaking “with the Spirit of God” were common in his community:

Let Marcion then exhibit, as gifts of his god, some prophets, such as have not spoken by human sense, but with the Spirit of God, such as have both predicted things to come, and have made manifest the secrets of the heart; let him produce a psalm, a vision, a prayer—only let it be by the Spirit, in an ecstasy, that is, in a rapture, whenever an interpretation of tongues has occurred to him; let him show to me also, that any woman of boastful tongue in his community has ever prophesied from amongst those specially holy sisters of his. Now all these signs (of spiritual gifts) are forthcoming from my side without any difficulty, and they agree, too, with the rules, and the dispensations, and the instructions of the Creator [[Against Marcion](#), V, 8].

Tertullian thus declares that speaking “with the Spirit of God” occurs in an ecstatic state, “in a rapture.” And nowhere does he insist that said speaking consisted of foreign languages, not ecstatic gibberish.

A fourth-century inscription reveals partially the extent of the Montanist error; it reproduces a baptismal formula that replaces the Holy Spirit with Montanus:

Flavius Avus, domesticus, has fulfilled what he promised in the name of the Father and of the Son (and) of dominus [Lord] Muntanus [[Tabbernee](#)].

That this inscription constitutes the Montanist baptismal formula “has found almost universal acceptance” ([Tabbernee](#)).

The contemporary Christian community reacted decisively to these aberrations. One Zephyrinus, to whom the Roman Catholic Church arrogated its papacy during 199–217, condemned Montanism as a heresy ([Catholic Almanac](#)), and the Synod at Iconium, c. 230–235, declared Montanist baptism invalid ([Tabbernee](#)). The synod held at Laodicea ad Lycum (Laodicea in Phrygia Pacatiana), 343–381, also declared Montanist baptism invalid ([Synod of Laodicea](#), Canon VIII). And Basil of Caesaria, 329–379, declared in 375 that:

The Pepuzeni are plainly heretical, for, by unlawfully and shamefully applying to Montanus and Priscilla the title of the Paraclete, they have blasphemed against the Holy Ghost. They are, therefore, to be condemned for ascribing divinity to men; and for outraging the Holy Ghost by comparing Him to men. They are thus also liable to eternal damnation, inasmuch as blasphemy against the Holy Ghost admits of no forgiveness [[Letters and Select Works](#)].

Blaspheming against the Holy Spirit is hardly conducive to receiving special gifts from the same Holy Spirit, at least not the positive, pleasant, Biblical gifts: it is therefore far more probable that the Montanist tongues of which Tertullian exulted were ecstatic babbling, than that they were the known foreign languages that constitute the Biblical gift.

John Chrysostom, 345–407, wrote in reference to 1 Corinthians 12:

This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity hath produced us again another question: namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more? [[Chrysostom](#), 29].

Chrysostom was sufficiently unaware of any practice of Biblical tongues as to declare their cessation to be factual.

Aurelius Augustine, 354–430, Bishop of Hippo and a contemporary of Chrysostom, asked in about the year 400:

For who expects in these days that those on whom hands are laid that they may receive the Holy Spirit should forthwith begin to speak with tongues? [[On Baptism, Against the Donatists](#), III, 16, 21].

He also wrote:

In the earliest times, “the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spake with tongues,” which they had not learned, “as the Spirit gave them utterance.” These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to shew that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away. In the laying on of hands now, that persons may receive the Holy Ghost, do we look that they should speak with tongues? Or when we laid the hand on these infants, did each one of you look to see whether they would speak with tongues, and, when he saw that they did not speak with tongues, was any of you so wrong-minded as to say, These have not received the Holy Ghost; for, had they received, they would speak with tongues as was the case in those times? [[Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John](#), VI, 10].

This important citation shows that Augustine accepted as normative both that Biblical tongues consisted of foreign languages, and that these tongues had disappeared, “passed away,” before his time.

The testimonies of the earliest leaders of the Christian community indicate that tongues as previously unlearned foreign languages continued after the death of the apostles, but that acceptable, Biblical tongues had disappeared some time before the Council of Nicea in 325. Thus Chrysostom and Augustine, writing not long after that council, show that by their time, Biblical tongues had faded sufficiently to insignificance as to render these leaders ignorant of manifestations of them.

Biblical tongues, like old soldiers, “never die—they just fade away” ([Douglas MacArthur](#)).
