



Praying in Tongues, Speaking in Tongues, & Glossolalia: Don't Miss the Point



Most people miss the point when talking about speaking

tongues, praying in tongues, and glossolalia. Truth matters, and so does the context in which it's delivered. You need to look at the context surrounding the verses also or you'll completely miss the point.

In my opinion, the biggest mistake that most people make when interpreting the bible is not considering the context. Yes I mean the Biblical context, but I also mean also the historical and cultural context too.

Context is absolutely crucial.

If you've read [my article on Matthew 24/Revelation](#), you'll understand just how important this is. For that matter, if you've ever done a really deep study of a passage of the Bible you should understand this.

First I'm going to define terms so this article is clear. Then we'll look at some context, then we'll dive into it.

Praying in Tongues vs. Speaking in Tongues vs. Glossolalia

The Greek phrase translated "Speaking in Tongues" is two Greek words. They are "[Glossa](#)" meaning "tongue" or "language" and "[Laleo](#)" meaning "Speak". Together, we get the word "Glossolalia" which is just the Greek words transliterated into English.

In order to have a clear discussion, I'm going to define terms. I'm not married to these terms, but I must define them to make sure the article is clear.

So here goes:

Speaking in Tongues. In this Article, speaking on tongues means a believer supernaturally (*by the power of the Holy Spirit*) speaking in a language they have never been taught. I do mean real languages here like German, French, Russian, etc. One biblical example would be in Acts chapter 2 where Peter delivers a sermon and "*everyone heard him in their own language*".

Praying in Tongues. In this article, praying in tongues means praying to God in a language you don't know or in an "ecstatic utterance" which sounds the same as Glossolalia. (*as defined next*)

Glossolalia. In this article, glossolalia means the "ecstatic utterance" often exhibited by Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians. Many Christians and unbelievers consider this to be "*babbling*" and it's often the target of much criticism.

Because virtually all the discussion about tongues in the Bible is located in 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14, some context is appropriate. (*again, if you've read my [article on Revelation](#), you'll know I'm stickler for getting the context right*)

Some historical Context for Glossolalia and 1 Corinthians 12-14

First, the practice of Glossolalia (*as defined above*) is FAR older than the New Testament.

However, the recorded cases of glossolalia go back as far as 1100 B.C. On that occasion a young Amon worshiper attracted historical infamy when he became possessed by a god and began to make sounds in a strange ecstatic tongue.

Seven hundred years later, the Greek philosopher Plato demonstrated that he was well acquainted with the phenomenon of speaking in tongues as he referred to several families

who practiced ecstatic speech, praying and utterings while supposedly possessed. He also pointed out that **these practices had even brought physical healing to those who engaged in them**. Plato and most of his contemporaries asserted that these occurrences were caused by divine inspiration.

[\(Source\)](#)

The priestesses of Apollo – called a pythoness – popularized Glossolalia (*as defined above*) in their worship of the pagan god.

How it worked was you made a large donation to the Temple of Apollo and you got the ask the Pythoness a single question. She would the pray to the god Apollo at a fissure at the altar. Recently tested it was found that a mildly toxic gas was, and still is, emitted from this crack in the Earth. The Oracle is over the junction of two earthquake faults. She, the Pythoness, would start dancing around and babbling incoherently. A Priest of the temple would “translate” what the Pythoness had said. She was speaking the speech of the gods and was getting all her information from Apollo.

[\(Source\)](#)

John MacArthur says the following in the notes section on page 299 of his book “Strange Fire”:

Some consider the chants of voodoo witch doctors, African animists, and the Tibetan Buddhist Monks, the prayer of Hindu holy men, and the basic primeval sounds produced other in their religious settings as glossolalia. Many of these worshipers make sounds and utterances that approximate purported languages found in the glossolalia of Pentecostal and Charismatic worship services...

...Gromacki refers to frenzied speech (glossolalia) occurring among the ancient Greek and early Phoenician religions, the Greco-Roman mystery religions, Islam, Eskimo Paganism, and paganism in Tibet and China. Of note, Gerhard F. Hasel, *Speaking in Tongues* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society, 1991), 14, 18 also includes “shamans” and “witch doctors” in the list of pagan tongue speakers.

The point is simple: Glossolalia (*as defined above*) is not unique to Christianity. In fact, it predates Christianity by at least 300 years, and probably more like 1100 years.

This doesn't prove anything by itself because demons have been trying to counterfeit God's miracles for a long time. (*The sorcerers in Egypt were able to replicate many of the plagues on a small scale*).

However, it's certain that glossolalia was a common practice during the time of Christ and the apostles. In addition to the one mentioned above, many of the Roman Mystery religions and cults practiced it. Most notable were the Cybele-Attis cult, the Dionysian cult, and the religion of Apollo.

The Church at Corinth was the only church where speaking in tongues appeared to be a problem. Mention of it in the other epistles is non-existent.

Why?

Because of the Temple of Apollo in Corinth, Glossolalia was extremely common for Corinthians to encounter.

1st century Corinth was home to a massive temple to Apollo. Like the other temples to Apollo, the practice of “ecstatic utterances” (*glossolalia*) was a normal part of their religious system.

It would make sense that the pagans at Corinth who converted to Christianity brought their own notions of worship (*including Glossolalia*) into their Corinthian Church. **That doesn't mean glossolalia is necessarily pagan or ungodly.** It could mean the Corinthian converts were using their gifts incorrectly because of their prior experience with Apollo worship.

Now we'll examine the three types in detail.

Speaking in Tongues

If you are a Bible-believing Christian, then speaking in tongues (*as defined above*) shouldn't be a problem. As I said, it's what Peter did in Acts chapter 2 so it's clearly biblical. It's a verified miracle that God uses to advance His Kingdom on earth, and it goes especially well with evangelism.

Enough said on that topic because everyone already agrees on it.

Praying in Tongues

The New Testament devotes very little space to speaking in tongues. Praying in tongues gets even less time at only 5 verses in all of Scripture. (*EDIT: a reader pointed out that Jude 1:20 and Ephesians 6:18 also mention praying the Spirit in passing, so 7 verses. My mistake.*)

The context for those verses (*which are copied below*) is all about building up the body.

1 Corinthians 12 talks about how we are one body with different gifts and the gifts work together to build each other up. 1 Corinthians 13 is the famous “love chapter” and talks about how we need to be loving or the gifts are useless. The first part of chapter 14 talks about how prophecy is more desirable than tongues because prophecy builds up others.

Please keep that in mind as you read the rest of this article.

1 Corinthians 14:13-17

- 13** Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.
- 14** For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.
- 15** What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.
- 16** Otherwise if you bless in the spirit only, **how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying?**
- 17** For you are giving thanks well enough, **but the other person is not edified.**

Notice verses 16 and 17.

I don't think Paul's talking about a person praying alone at home because he mentions other people. Again, remember the context. Paul has spent the last 2 1/2 chapters talking about how the gifts are given for building up the body.

This passage is no different.

Paul is talking about how to use praying in tongues to build up the body. Ultimately, that's why the Holy Spirit grants us spiritual gifts: so we may use them to help others. The goal – and whole point – of Paul's discussion of gifts is that we should use our gifts to edify others.

The passage above is instruction for praying for/with others. Paul's point seems simple and obvious from my perspective. My take on Paul's instruction is this:

“Praying in tongues doesn't edify others, so I prefer to pray with my mind so I can edify others.”

Please note, Paul does NOT say: “don't pray in tongues.”

That's not the point.

The point is praying in tongues ***for others*** doesn't help them much because they can't understand what you are saying.

I'm sure we've all had the experience of someone praying for us when we were feeling bad. Sometimes what they say is just as encouraging as getting prayer. I've even received revelations about myself and the character of God by listening to others pray. (*not to mention learning how to pray better*)

It seems like that's what Paul is after: building up others through our gifts.

So it's better to pray for others normally because it edifies them, but what about when I'm in my prayer closet at home?

To put it bluntly, I don't have a clue.

The Bible doesn't speak about it at all. Those five verses are all God has given us (*in the Bible*) about praying in tongues. I don't like to speculate about it either. I have a few opinions, but they aren't inspired and I can't back them up with scriptural truth.

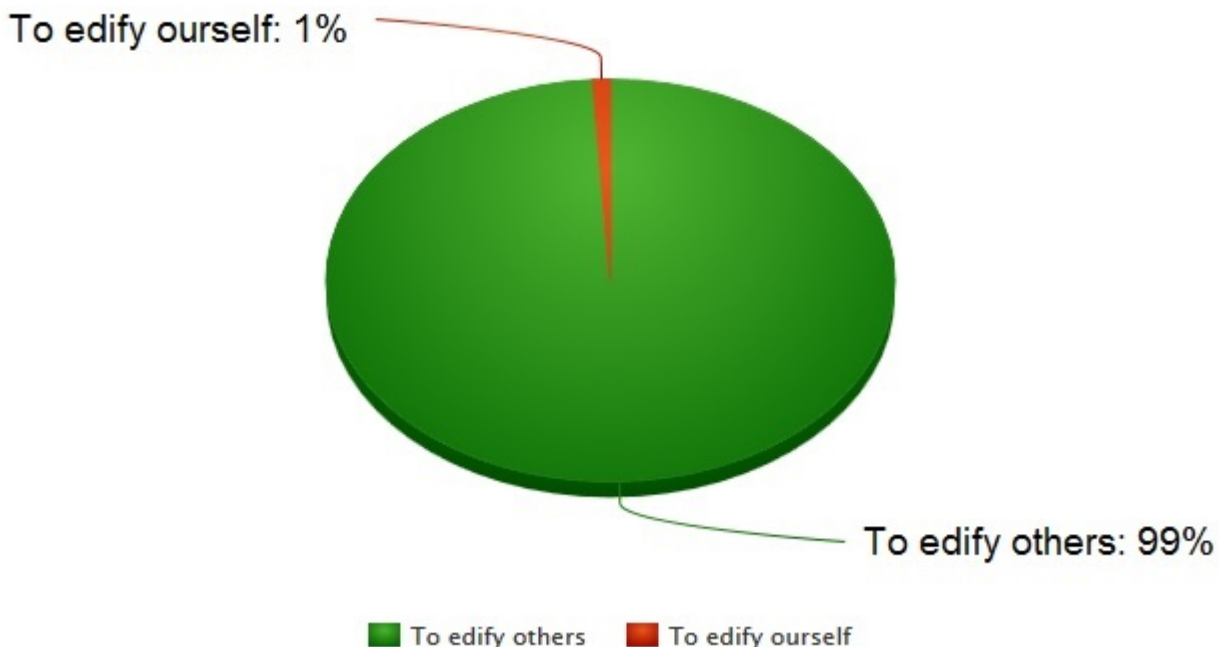
The best thing I have is Seek, Listen and Obey whatever instruction God gives you. If you want to pray in tongues at home, that's fine. If you want to avoid doing it, that's fine too.

Follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Glossolalia & Speaking in Tongues in the Church

Again, let's look at the context. As I said in the section about praying in tongues, the point here is to build up others.

The Reasons we have Spiritual Gifts



So how does speaking in tongues and glossolalia edify others in the Church?

The simple answer is it doesn't unless there's an interpreter present. Paul says this in the verses right

after the part about praying in tongues. (*So the context is the same: it's about edifying others*)

1 Corinthians 14:18-19

18 I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all;

19 however, **in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.**

Paul says that in Church, 5 words spoken with the mind are better than 10,000 in a tongue.

It doesn't get any clearer, and it's because speaking in tongues and glossolalia don't edify anyone unless there's an interpreter. Paul says something similar at the beginning of the chapter, so we'll back up a bit.

1 Corinthians 14:1-3

1 Pursue love, yet **desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.**

2 For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries.

3 But **one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.**

4 One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but **one who prophesies edifies the church.**

5 Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and **greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.**

Notice Paul's focus here. He says it would be nice if everyone would speak in tongues, but **prophecy is better because it edifies the body.** Remember that's the focus of this whole section of scripture.

Further, Glossolalia and speaking in tongues (*as defined above*) can actually hurt the church when used incorrectly.

1 Corinthians 14:23-25

23 Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?

24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all;

25 the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

I've had this exact experience of thinking that people doing glossolalia were absolutely out of their minds... Just like what the Bible says would happen.

Remember, the point here is to edify.

For unbelievers, that partially means spreading the Gospel. However, if unbelievers walk into a Church and hear everyone doing glossolalia or speaking in tongues (*as defined above*) they're going to think you're mad. Paul recognizes this.

How will you be able to edify someone when they think you're nuts? (*Even if you're not*)

You've lost all chance of bringing the Gospel to them... And haven't edified ANYONE. (*unless there's an interpreter*) glossolalia can actually damage your witness for Christ and it's hard to edify anyone with it. (*without an interpreter*) Everyone claims to have the gift of tongues or glossolalia, but have you noticed how few have the gift of interpretation of tongues/glossolalia?

That's why later on Paul says:

1 Corinthians 14:27-28

27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret;

28 but if there is no interpreter, he **must keep silent in the church**; and let him speak to himself and to God.

Paul is very clear on this point. If there isn't an interpreter then **in Church** you shouldn't be speaking in tongues or glossolalia.

Period.

Please note, Paul does NOT say: "don't speak in tongues."

He says don't speak in tongues **in the Church** unless there is an interpreter. There's a difference. If you want to speak in tongues or do glossolalia in your own home, then there's no conflict with Paul's

commands here. But again, Paul is very clear that speaking in tongues isn't for in the Church because it doesn't edify the Church (*unless there is an interpreter*).

Paul's command is very clear on this point.

We wouldn't dream of disobeying the Bible's commands against murder, theft, or lying. When the Bible issues a command, we should follow it. (*If we don't agree on that point, then why are we even talking about what the Bible teaches?*) Again, you must not speak in tongues (*or glossolalia*) **in the Church** unless there's an interpreter because it does not edify.

So the next time you see a pastor teaching and he breaks out in into glossolalia during a sermon, realize he is violating the direct command of God.

The same goes for a church member who does the same thing (*though obviously not during a sermon*). Neither glossolalia nor speaking in tongues belong in a church service unless there is an interpreter. Period. The Bible is very clear on this point.

To be clear, I'm only talking about at church, and I would personally included church functions. If you want to do it in your own home, go right ahead. But in the church, listen to the Bible's command and keep silent unless there is an interpreter.

Paul does tell us the proper way to speak in tongues in the Church in those same verses.

1 Corinthians 14:27-28

27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret;

28 but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.

That's about as clear as it gets. Those who speak in tongues must be in turn (*one at a time*) and someone must translate. Otherwise they must to keep silent. So if you are breaking out in spontaneous (*loud*) glossolalia during the church service – especially on stage with a mike – you are being disobedient to the Bible's explicit command.

In your own home or by yourself, it's fine.

But it's not fine in a Church service.

And just in case you are think that glossolalia (*and the gift of tongues*) are a sign of God's presence, you might want to read verse 22. Paul confirms that speaking in tongues is NOT a sign for believers. Paul says so quite clearly.

1 Corinthians 14:22

22 So then tongues are for a sign, NOT to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.

(emphasis added)

We'll come back to this in the next section.

Is Glossolalia (as defined above) Biblical?

There's one place that seems fairly clear on this point if you consider the original Greek. It's not perfectly clear, but it's the clearest place in the scriptures I've yet found.

(Please note this is also in 1 Cor 14, so all the previous context applies.)

1 Cor 14:9-10

7 Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp?

8 For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?

9 So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

10 There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning.

Of particular note is the phrase "no kind". It doesn't get any more inclusive than that.

The word translated as "world" there is the Greek word "[Kosmos](#)" from which we get our word "cosmos". It's all inclusive, meaning that heaven is included. (*tongues of angels*) Mirriam-Webster.com (*Webster's dictionary*) has [this to say about our word Cosmos](#):

Cosmos often simply means "universe". But the word is generally used to suggest an orderly or harmonious universe, as it was originally used by Pythagoras in the 6th century B.C.

Notice that the meaning of the word is virtually unchanged since the 6th Century BC – hundreds of years before Christ. Note also that it refers to an orderly universe.

The phrase “without meaning” is the single Greek word “[Aphonos](#)“. Aphonos is actually from two words. The first is “A” meaning “not” (*like “Atypical”, meaning not typical*). The second is the word “[Phone](#)“, which the root word of our word “Phonics” and our word “phone”.

The meaning really hasn’t changed much in two thousand years. Phonics is the basis for understanding reading, writing and spoken language.

Phonics IS the difference between a language and all other sounds.

So really, Paul says no language is without phonics; i.e. the thing with makes languages understandable. If you look at verses 7-9, this makes sense. Verses 7 & 8 talk about instruments needing to be clear or no one will know what they are. Verse 9 says that speech likewise should be clear.

I think verses 7-10 are Paul saying that glossolalia isn’t a language because it lacks “phonos” or phonics. Glossolalia is not clear and no one knows what anyone the person saying. It’s sounds (*to me*) like he’s correcting their use of glossolalia because it doesn’t have phonics and isn’t clear or understandable.

I would argue that Glossolalia (as defined above) is NOT biblical because of Paul’s statement that “no language is Aphonos (*without Phonics*)”

We’ve already covered that glossolalia was a very common thing in Corinth. I think that Paul is correcting their glossolalia and distinguishing it from the gift of speaking tongues (*as defined above*). To further prove the point, Strongs has the following note about the root of “Phone”

“Probably akin to (5316) through the idea of disclosure”

Strongs number 5316 is the word “[Phaino](#)“, which carries the definition:

1. to bring forth into the light, cause to shine, **shed light**
2. shine
 1. to shine, be bright or resplendent
 2. to become evident, to be brought forth into the light, come to view, appear

Even today, we ask someone to “shed light” on a topic when you want to understand it. Phonics is the way we “Shed light” on a language. It’s how we make a language understandable and clear.

Every scientific study of Glossolalia ever conducted (*including those done by Christians*) has concluded there’s no language. An excellent summery can be found [here](#). Excerpts are below.

“When the full apparatus of linguistic science comes to bear on glossolalia, this turns out to

be only a facade of language — although at times a very good one indeed. For when we comprehend what language is, we must conclude that no glossa, no matter how well constructed, is a specimen of human language, because it is neither internally organized nor systematically related to the world man perceives.

And also from the same article.

- Some of the subscribers noted that glossolalia had a simple primitive structure, and exhibited very frequent repetition of individual sounds.
- One commented that the words spoken within a given church tended to be similar, and unlike the sounds heard within in another congregation.
- Another commented that his observations among American churchgoers showed that they “seem to latch onto and then repeat sounds that sound foreign to them, and intersperse the name ‘Jesus’ in between the sounds.”

Glossolalia doesn't have all the defining attributes of a language.

I would argue Paul's speaking in tongues is similar to Acts 2 when everyone heard Peter speaking in their own language. I would argue this is for evangelism. It makes spreading the Gospel a LOT easier if you don't need to learn all the languages first. At least two of the early Church Fathers backs up this position.

This is an excerpt from Origen's (185-254 AD) commentary on Romans 1:13

Now one must ask how the Apostle is under obligation to the Greeks and the non-Greeks, to the wise and the foolish ones — namely what did he learn from them that he was obligated to them? I certainly think that he had become indebted with the diverse nations because **he was speaking in the languages of the nations which he received through the gift of the Holy Spirit, even as he himself said, “I speak in tongues more than you all.” Because then he did not acquire the knowledge of languages on his own account alone but for those he was about to preach**, the debt is being accomplished to all these of whom he received the knowledge of many languages from God.

And also:

After Pentecost, the concept of speaking in tongues was also present throughout the early Church period. Irenaeus (114-202 AD), in his work *Against Heresies*, speaks out against the abuse of the prophetic gift that often lead to violent emotions and loss of chastity.

In early times, the gift of tongues was regarded as the ability to speak languages with which to communicate the Gospel. See what the apostle Paul had to say about spiritual gifts in his letter to the Corinthian Church

Even Origen (185-254 AD), writing of Paul's gift of tongues mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:18, clearly refers to the gift as the ability to speak a known language for the purpose of preaching the Gospel to others.

[\(Source\)](#)

Further, Paul himself confirms that speaking in tongues is NOT a sign for believers. Paul says so quite clearly.

1 Corinthians 14:22

22 **So then tongues are for a sign, NOT to those who believe** but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.

(emphasis added)

How can tongues be sign for unbelievers unless the speaker is doing something supernatural? Someone speaking many different languages at once through the Holy Spirit (*like Peter in Acts*) would certainly make me pay attention.

As we've already covered, the "ecstatic utterances" of glossolalia were **COMMON** during the time of Christ. Several Roman cults and a host of minor religions practiced it. In Corinth, it was especially common because of the temple of Apollo.

How can something be a sign/miracle if it's common?

On the other hand, what if Paul was speaking their language without learning it? (*or speaking multiple languages at once like Peter*). Now that would be a miracle/sign that Paul represented the One True God.

However, Glossoloalia – which was common around that time – wouldn't have convinced anyone of anything. In fact, you might have been mistaken for an Apollo worshipper.

Conclusion

I know many Christians who love God and firmly believe that glossolalia (as defined above) is a gift from God. I've never been convinced though. I freely admit part of this skepticism might come from my first introduction to "speaking in tongues"

I was 18 and had never heard of it before when I sat through my first Pentecostal church service. That Sunday, several of the members spontaneously started "speaking in tongues" during the singing. My first thought was "*These guys are nuts.*" As we've already seen, the Bible exactly predicted my reaction.

More important though, is that we edify one another.

My take on what the Bible says is this: praying in tongues, speaking in tongues, and glossolalia don't really have a place in Church meetings because they don't edify others. If you want to do those things by yourself, that's fine. But Paul says you must keep silent in Church meetings unless there is an interpreter.

Speaking in tongues (*as defined above*) is a wonderful tool for evangelism. It makes it easier to spread the Gospel and provides visible proof of the power of God. Speaking in tongues (*as defined above*) is tremendously useful in spreading the Gospel.

Personally, I think glossolalia (*as defined above*) isn't from God. It doesn't **and can't** edify other believer (*unless *maybe* if there's an interpreter*). Paul even says that tongues/glossolalia is not a sign for believers, but for unbelievers. Glossolalia doesn't advance the cause of Christ because it's not for believers, and – like the Bible says – unbelievers will just think you're mad.

How does that edify anyone?

Further, Paul says no language is "Aphonos" or without phonics. Glossolalia is definitely "Aphonos". Even if glossolalia is a real gift from God, it's certainly not one of the greater gifts. Paul even says so, especially that prophecy is a better gift to have.

That's merely my opinion on glossolalia. Please, be like the Bereans in Acts 17:11 and search the scriptures to see if what I'm saying is so. (*and if you find out it's not so, please [contact me](#) to let me know.*)

As Paul said, let all things be done for edification.