RESOURCE CLUSTER 1 • ARTICLE

# Tongues at Pentecost

By James Burke

Few subjects connected to Pentecost generate more confusion than tongues. Discussions often become dominated by denominational controversy, personal experience, or modern debates disconnected from the actual text of Acts 2.

But Luke's emphasis at Pentecost is remarkably clear. The miracle of tongues is directly connected to the proclamation of the mighty works of God among the nations.

To understand Pentecost properly, we must pay careful attention to what the text itself emphasizes.

## The Nations Gathered at Jerusalem

Acts 2 describes Jerusalem filled with Jewish pilgrims from many regions of the known world. Luke deliberately lists the nations present: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, dwellers in Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Crete, Arabia, and others.

This long list is not accidental. Luke wants readers to see the international scope of the moment. Pentecost already points outward toward the nations.

## "How Hear We Every Man…"

> *"How hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?"*
>
> Acts 2:8

The emphasis repeatedly falls upon hearing, language, and understanding. Luke explicitly describes recognizable human languages spoken among the gathered peoples.

The miracle is not presented primarily as ecstatic speech disconnected from comprehension. The miracle is that the mighty works of God are proclaimed publicly across the languages of the nations.

This matters enormously for understanding Pentecost.

## The Mighty Works of God

> *"We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God."*
>
> Acts 2:11

The content of the speech is central. Tongues at Pentecost are not presented as chaotic noise, mystical self-expression, or private spirituality. They function as proclamation.

The mighty works of God are being announced publicly among the nations. Pentecost therefore is deeply missionary and outward-facing from the very beginning.

## Pentecost and the Nations

Some Christians describe Pentecost as a “reversal of Babel.” That language can be helpful in limited ways, but it can also become misleading if pressed too far.

Scripture never presents the existence of multiple nations and languages as inherently evil. In fact, the nations remain throughout Scripture, linguistic diversity remains in Revelation, and redeemed humanity still worships God as peoples and nations.

Pentecost does not erase the nations. Pentecost announces that the Gospel belongs to the nations.

The mighty works of God are proclaimed across languages rather than confined to one ethnic or national group. This is not the destruction of diversity. It is the outward expansion of the Gospel into the diversity of the nations.

## Tongues as Covenant Expansion

Tongues at Pentecost also function as signs connected to covenantal expansion. The Gospel is moving outward beyond localized expectation toward worldwide proclamation.

The Kingdom of God is no longer centered merely in one geographic or national focus. The risen Christ is gathering a people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.

This helps explain why tongues appear at several major expansion points in Acts. These moments are connected to visible covenantal expansion as the Gospel moves outward.

## The Priority of Understanding

Acts 2 repeatedly emphasizes understanding. The miracle astonishes the crowd because they hear, recognize their languages, and understand the proclamation.

This emphasis continues into Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians. Even there, intelligibility remains central in public worship. The goal is not confusion. The goal is edification and proclamation.

God reveals Himself through meaningful communication.

## Christ at the Center

Most importantly, Pentecost keeps Christ central. The miracle itself is not the focus. The proclamation of Christ is the focus.

Peter immediately stands and preaches Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ exalted, and Christ reigning. The tongues serve the Gospel proclamation. The miracle points beyond itself to the reign of the risen

Christ.

## Why This Matters Today

Modern discussions about tongues often become disconnected from the missionary and Christ-centered emphasis of Pentecost.

Acts 2 reminds the church that the Gospel is for the nations, proclamation matters, understanding matters, and Christ remains central.

The church is not called merely to pursue experiences. The church is called to proclaim the mighty works of God among the nations under the power of the Holy Spirit.

That mission began publicly at Pentecost. And it continues today.

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