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The Gift of Tongues and Interpretation

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TWO OPPOSITE ERRORS regarding glossolalia—the modern technical term for “speaking in tongues,” coined in the nineteenth century and based on the New Testament expression *glossais lalein* (I Cor. 14:5; cf. Acts 10:46)—have consistently dogged interpreters of the New Testament through the centuries. Both have, at times, been fraught with serious consequences for the faith and order of the Church; both have involved a distortion of the only direct evidence we have, the New Testament writings themselves. In each case, the principle of a strict exegesis of the text has yielded to the pressure of other factors, emotional or sectarian in origin, and the result has been “eisegesis” and then false doctrine. On the one hand, church history (not to mention the contemporary scene) affords us many examples of those who have read into the New Testament the conviction that glossolalia is the inevitable sign of the bestowal of the Spirit upon an individual or company. Citing selected texts, these Christians would have us believe, perforce, that ability to “speak in tongues” (while admittedly inferior to other “gifts”) is, nevertheless, the *sine qua non* of Christian spirituality; it is the sign of being “Spirit-filled,” of being a “real Christian.” On the other hand, those who have been rightly concerned about the possibilities for heresy inherent in such a position, not to mention those whose motivation has been, perhaps, less defensible (e.g. those whose chief concern has been to seek—always, of course, on purely rational grounds!—for religion without emotion), have not seldom been betrayed into denying or repressing plain biblical assertions. This tendency is best illustrated in the words of a contemporary theologian who, when presented by a student with the question, “What do you make of the fourteenth chapter of I Corinthians?” promptly quipped, “Is there a fourteenth chapter of I Corinthians?” Unfortunately, there have also been those who, going much further still, have arrived at the curious (not to say, dangerous) position where anything resembling or purporting to be New Testament glossolalia is indiscriminately described as “the work of the devil.”

In the stormy controversy in the Corinthian Church, which St. Paul is asked to settle, both of these attitudes can be seen emerging. This is, of course, obvious in the case of the maximizing view of “tongues”; clearly there were those at Corinth who elevated the more spectacular manifestations of the Spirit out of all proportion to their actual value—but it is no less true of the opposite or minimizing position. Paul’s final words on the

subject in I Cor. 14:39 are: "Forbid not to speak in tongues." (Cf. I Thess. 5:19, where the readers are bidden not to quench the Spirit or despise prophecy.) Those scholars who maintain that Paul is really somewhat embarrassed by this whole matter and is, in fact, diplomatically suggesting that the Corinthian Church abandon such manifestations in their public worship and private devotions usually interpret the warning not to forbid "speaking in tongues" as a sign of the Apostle's wisdom, of his awareness that suppression would only serve to kindle interest and excitement. Such an explanation, however, loses its appeal in the light of frank consideration 'speak in tongues' " (I Cor. 14:5), or "I thank God I speak in tongues more than you all . . ." (14:18). Even when we have granted that St. Paul goes on, in both these instances, to state his preference for intelligible utterance, the difficulty remains. From what we know of the Apostle, he was not the man to speak in this manner of something that he regarded as an evil in the life of the Church—much less to include it in any way in a list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit!

Aware, then, of the two extremes outlined above (both of which claim to be completely scriptural), we turn briefly to the New Testament evidence, particularly as found in I Corinthians 12–14.

I. THE GOSPELS

F. W. Beare, in his paper "Speaking with Tongues—A Critical Survey of the New Testament Evidence,"¹ commences by noting that there is no reference in any of the canonical Gospels to "speaking in tongues": "It is never attributed to Jesus and is never promised by him to any of his followers." With this we must agree. The passage in Mark 16 (vv. 17b–18): "In my name they shall cast out demons, they shall speak with new tongues . . ." (*glōssais lalousin kainais*) belongs to the so-called "longer ending" (16:9–20) and was, in all probability, not part of the original Gospel. The earliest definite witness to this section as a part of Mark is Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 130–200).² C. E. B. Cranfield says of these verses: "They were probably attached to Mark some time before the middle of the second century in order to fill the obvious gap. But the clumsy connection shows that they were not specially written for this purpose." He goes on to state his conviction that they were originally compiled as a catechetical summary and that they may have been in existence for a considerable time before they were appended to the Gospel.³ This being the case, while the passage is not "Gospel evidence" it is, nevertheless, not without relevance for our

1. A paper prepared for the Bishop of Toronto's Committee on Glossolalia (1964), p. 1.

2. Cf. *Adv. Haer.*, III, x, 6.

3. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Commentary on Mark*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary Series, ed. C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge at the University Press, 1963), pp. 471ff.

subject. It is a witness to early Christian belief that one of the supernatural signs of the new age was the gift of "new tongues."

The saying of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount concerning heathen attitudes to prayer (Matt. 6:7-8): "And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words," is taken by some scholars to be a depreciation of any kind of unintelligible utterance and therefore, indirectly, of "tongues." This interpretation, however, is open to certain objections. The crux of the matter concerns the meaning of the rare Greek word *battalogeō* in verse 7.⁴ Scholarly opinion is divided as to whether the root sense of the word is "to stammer," i.e. to speak unintelligibly, or "to talk on in idle chatter," "to prattle endlessly," i.e. to use the accepted language, but in such a careless and repetitious manner that, in effect, it becomes meaningless. The weight of authority seems to favour this latter view, and this interpretation undoubtedly best fits the sense required by Jesus' reference to their "much speaking" (*polulogia*).⁵ The point of the saying is that the disciples are not to copy their heathen neighbours in believing that words and phrases in prayer are effective in proportion to their quantity. The New English Bible brings this out well when it reads: "In your prayers do not go babbling on like the heathen who imagine *that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard.*" The passage, accordingly, refers not so much to unintelligible speech as to the mere repetition of pious or ritual words for their own sake, without regard to the inner disposition of the heart. As such it applies to all prayer, whether it be "glossolalic" or part of the Book of Common Prayer; it is not to be mere repetition of sacred formulae, but communion with the Father—from the heart.

II. THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

We are prevented by considerations of space from detailed analysis of relevant passages, and so must confine ourselves to several general observations. In the first place, the evidence makes it quite clear that glossolalia was a common experience in the early Church (cf. Acts 10:46, 19:6). The reference to the charge of drunkenness brought against the apostles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:13) reveals that it is this phenomenon that is, in fact, being described.⁶ What is perhaps equally significant is the fact

4. For a different assessment, cf. F. W. Beare, "Speaking with Tongues," p. 1.

5. Cf. J. H. Moulton and W. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), p. 107; Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 137; Blass-Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. R. W. Funk (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), p. 23, sect. 40.

6. Scholars have for some time been widely divided on their assessment of the reliability of Luke's account at this point, with important figures on either side. For the more conservative position see G. B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age* (London: Duckworth, 1955), p. 60; for the opposite, F. W. Beare, "Speaking with Tongues," pp. 10f. It seems to the present writer highly unlikely that Luke, the travelling companion of St. Paul, would have been as confused about this phenomenon as some critics appear to suggest.

that, according to Luke, Peter and the others regarded their "speaking in tongues" as part of the direct fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2:15-17): "For these men are not drunk as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. . . ." Similarly, in the Cornelius narrative, Luke indicates clearly that it was because of the sudden "speaking in tongues" that Peter and the others were compelled to admit that the Holy Spirit had indeed fallen upon those present, even though they were Gentiles (Acts 10:44-48): "While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God." Peter then proceeds to baptize them on the ground that they have received the Spirit in the same way as the Apostles themselves (v. 47; cf. Peter's report to the Jerusalem authorities, Acts II:15ff).

It would, however, be a serious mistake to conclude from these and other passages in Acts (e.g. 19:1ff.) that the author intends us to understand that glossolalia was the inevitable accompaniment or "evidence" of the bestowal of the Spirit in fulness. When he describes how the crowd responded to Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost and some three thousand were baptized, Luke omits any reference to "tongues." Similarly, in the case of St. Paul himself, Ananias lays his hands upon him in prayer for his healing and the filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17ff.) but, while the restoration of sight is briefly but vividly described, there is no reference to ecstatic utterance. The gift that Paul himself attests to in I Cor. 14:18 may have been received at this time, but we have no evidence for saying so. We simply do not know. Examination of other narratives such as the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26ff.), the conversion of the Philippian jailor (16:25ff.), and Paul's preaching in Athens (17; note especially v. 34) produces the same negative result. St. John Chrysostom, writing in the late fourth century, gives it as his opinion that in the early Church, "when anyone was baptized he straightway spoke with tongues" (although he goes on to point out that it had ceased in his day), but the evidence is simply not there.

In fact, if we sum up the picture of early Christianity given in Acts, we must in all honesty confess that it is one of great diversity and freedom in the things of the Spirit. At times the Spirit is given through the laying on of hands, at other times without; there is no fixed, unalterable pattern. Any attempt, therefore, to reduce the working of the Spirit here to rigid formulae, dictating when and how he must be received, involves the forcible importation of predetermined ideas into the text. What we are given, rather, is a glorious witness to the sovereign freedom of the mighty Spirit of God.

7. Cf. Caird, *The Apostolic Age*, p. 60.

III. THE EPISTLES

While some scholars have seen reference to glossolalia and related experiences in such passages as Rom. 8:23, I Thess. 5:17-19, Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:18-19, etc., the only direct allusion (and indeed the fullest New Testament discussion) is to be found in the detailed account given in I Cor. 12-14. Here, in dealing with certain disorders in the Christian community at Corinth, Paul is clearly giving us his own views on the subject, based on his own personal experience; for, as he tells us, he himself possessed this (to us) unusual gift in a very high degree (14:18).

Before proceeding, however, to an outline of Paul's own thought on the matter, one caveat must be recorded. We would do well to be very cautious about the suggestion, made by some critics, that the fact that Paul has to deal here with disorders and divisions somehow casts a shadow of disparagement over the entire phenomenon. This idea simply cannot be maintained unless we are prepared to deny that we owe the priceless account of the Lord's Supper in I Cor. 11:17ff. to reasons of precisely the same kind. It is *because of disorder* and confusion concerning the Eucharist that St. Paul treats of it in detail in this Epistle. What then does he tell us about "speaking in tongues" and "interpretation"?

1. Both glossolalia and interpretation (*hermeneia*) are ranked as *charismata*, i.e. as grace-gifts of the Spirit (12:10, 29ff., etc.).

2. The question as to whether or not glossolalia involves speaking foreign languages (cf. Acts 2:6) or simply unintelligible "heavenly languages" is left open. Paul begins his "hymn to love" (chap. 13), right in the middle of the discussion of spiritual gifts, with the words "Though I speak with the *tongues of men and of angels*. . . ." He teaches clearly that "tongues" are patient of "interpretation," and the word for this (*hermeneia*) comes from a verb whose root meaning is to interpret foreign tongues (*hemeneuo*).

3. *Not everyone speaks in tongues* or interprets. In 12:30 Paul asks the rhetorical question, "Do all speak with tongues?" Even in the English translation the meaning is clear, but the Greek allows of no mistake. The answer expected is "No." (The particle *mē*, with the interrogative, expects the answer "No.")

4. "Tongues," where love is lacking, mean no more than the clash of cymbals (13:1), and one day they will cease altogether (13:9). It should, however, be noted that to press either of these statements, while failing to recognize that they apply equally to the gift of prophecy and the gift of knowledge itself, is to treat the text in an arbitrary fashion. "Tongues," prophecy, and knowledge will all pass away when that which is perfect comes (13:8-10).

5. Nevertheless, glossolalia is inferior to the other gifts listed; for example, it is less important than prophecy, inasmuch as he who prophesies edifies the Church, whereas he who speaks in a "tongue" edifies himself (14:4). It is not always noticed, however, that Paul bids the man with a gift of

"tongues" to pray for the gift of interpretation, and that in his view "tongues" plus interpretation equals prophecy: "He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, *unless someone interprets*, so that the Church may be edified" (14:5). "Tongues" can edify not only the individual, but also the Church, provided there be an interpreter present.

6. It is for this reason precisely that St. Paul allows glossolalia a part in the fellowship meetings of the Corinthian Church. However, the gift is to be most carefully controlled, following a set order of procedure (14:26ff.).

7. By his words at this point St. Paul makes it quite clear that, in his experience and view, glossolalia is something over which the individual has control. It is not some sort of emotional seizure or ecstasy, in any extreme sense of the latter word. If there is no interpreter, men are bidden to keep silence, speaking to themselves and to God (14:28).

8. There can be no doubt that, while St. Paul is fully aware of the possibilities of abuse and of distortion where glossolalia is concerned, he is, nevertheless, persuaded that it is a genuine religious experience; he who speaks in a "tongue" speaks mysteries to God (14:2).⁸ For Paul, it is a kind of prayer (14:14). More than this, his words strongly suggest that it is a particular type of prayer, i.e. praise (14:16-17). This accords well with Acts 2:11 where, on the day of Pentecost, the crowd speak of hearing the Apostles "speak in our own tongues the mighty works of God" (cf. I Thess. 5:18ff.). Finally, Paul possesses the gift himself and expresses his willingness that they all share in it (14:5).

A careful reading of these chapters reveals the great depth of wisdom and balance with which St. Paul approaches the whole subject. He is keenly aware of the risks involved wherever free spiritual expression is allowed—of the possibility that ecstasy may usurp the place of reason, that love may be replaced by rivalry and the edification of the whole body by an inward-looking emotionalism devoted to the cult of self. But at the same time he is most careful to safeguard the spontaneity and great wealth of variety that worship "in the Spirit" meant to him and to these young converts. He insists throughout that it is essential to keep glossolalia within the set limits of what can be done "decently and in order," but he never suggests that this particular manifestation is anything but a profound religious experience.⁹ He is anxious that, in insisting upon structure and form in worship, he should not at the same time lose the fulness and variety of free participation. Oscar Cullman, in his little book *Early Christian Worship*, contrasts the over-structured worship of his own church with the free working of the Spirit in the early Christian communities.¹⁰ Referring to the Corinthian Church and the varied elements of worship there, he comments: "They are extraordinarily numerous, and it is astonishing how many forms the life of worship in these first Christian communities has assumed." Such richness,

8. Cf. John Knox, *Life in Christ Jesus* (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), pp. 106f.

9. Cf. *ibid.*; Bishop Stephen Neill, "Pentecost Brethren," *Church of England Newspaper*, January 10, 1964, p. 10.

10. Cf. O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), p. 26.

of course, presents dangers (as outlined above), but Cullman goes on to say: "He [Paul] has recognized the danger of this wealth, but he has not thrown away the baby with the bath water. On the contrary he has preserved everything which can contribute to the building up of the body of Christ."¹¹

Glossolalia, therefore, according to St. Paul, is a form of prayer—not given to all or to be demanded of every man on the one hand, or to be despised and banished from the Church on the other. We cannot, then, agree with those who would maintain that St. Paul's main purpose in this Epistle is to discourage the practice of speaking in tongues among Christians. Rather, we would say with John Knox: "We are tempted to dismiss with a certain contempt the ecstatic worship of the Church at Corinth. But we have no right to do so; certainly St. Paul does not do so. He deprecates the lack of order; but he does not deprecate the significance of ecstasy. He knows that at the base of all worship is ecstasy; that the heart of prayer is a cry."¹²

IV. CONCLUSIONS

There is no reference to "speaking in tongues" or in the interpretation of the same in the Book of Revelation; thus our brief look at the New Testament evidence has come to an end.

What conclusions can we draw (remembering that for the Church of the sixties this is no purely academic concern)?¹³ From our consideration of scriptural teaching, particularly that of St. Paul, it is obvious that both of the extreme positions to which we referred at the beginning must be repudiated. We must beware both of those who try to exalt "tongues" and insist that all must have this gift and of those who would deny the validity of the phenomenon in any form and despise those who claim to experience it. Human nature prefers a rigid "either-or," but the Holy Spirit cannot be bound. In fact, this may well be the real significance of what is reported as happening in some of the classical churches today. As we hear of sporadic occurrences of glossolalia in (of all places!) Anglican churches, both in the United States and Great Britain, we will do well to ask, "What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?" The answer is clearly not that speaking in tongues is the *sine qua non* of revival or true spirituality. Rather, it is that our rigidities and formalisms, our preconceived ideas as to how and on what terms the Holy Spirit must come and work in us (no matter what our churchmanship), our often unconscious scepticism and unbelief are being challenged. In an interesting article entitled "Pentecostal Brethren," Bishop Stephen Neill makes this same point. After warning against unscriptural

11. *Ibid.*

12. Knox, *Life in Christ Jesus*, p. 106.

13. The setting up of committees and commissions on glossolalia in many American dioceses, not to mention coverage in newspapers and national news magazines, gives ample evidence of the occurrence of the phenomenon inside the classical churches in our own day.

views and echoing the words of Paul about preferring to speak a few words in a tongue that his hearers can understand rather than ten thousand in a tongue that they cannot, he continues: "But if, one day, I found myself constrained to utterance after a fashion that at present I know not, I should neither be alarmed nor excited; I should be inclined to accept this as a warning from the divine Spirit that perhaps I have been too much inclined to limit him to the normal and familiar, and that I must be prepared to enlarge my horizons to include the unfamiliar and the uncongenial."¹⁴

14. *Church of England Newspaper*, January 10, 1964, p. 10. (For a very thorough and fair account of early Christian experience, cf. P. G. S. Hopwood, *The Religious Experience of the Primitive Church* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963].)