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The Nature and Function of New Testament Glossolalia

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Keywords: New Testament; theology, Holy Spirit; charismata; glossolalia; tongues.

Introduction

R. A. Harrisville, in an article on the lexicography of glossolalia, noted that there are thirty-five references to what is commonly called 'speaking in tongues' in the New Testament.¹ There are twenty-eight references in 1 Corinthians, of which twenty-three appear in chapter 14. The remainder (seven) appear in the Gospel of Mark and the Acts of the Apostles.² Usually the phenomenon is referred to by the noun γλῶσσα (tongue) and the verb λαλεῖν (to speak). The most common variant of phrase is that of Paul, namely: γλώσσαις (to speak in tongues); although he also uses the singular form: λαλεῖν (ἐν) γλώσσει (to speak in a tongue). In Acts, Luke uses the phrase: λαλεῖν ἐτέραις γλώσσαις (to speak in other tongues—2:4), λαλούντων γλώσσαις (speaking in tongues—10:46) and ἐλάλουν τε γλώσσαις (they spoke in tongues—19:6). Whether the Lukan version is more original than Paul's, because it is a longer version; or whether both are equally origi-

1 R. A. Harrisville, 'Speaking in Tongues: A Lexicographical Study', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38.1, 1976, 35–48; reprinted in W. E. Mills (ed.), *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986) 35–51; cf. H. Hess, 'A Study of Glōssa in the New Testament', *The Bible Translator* 15, 1964, 93–96. Rom. 8:26, Eph. 5:18 and Jude 20 have also been interpreted as referring to glossolalia, cf. R. Banks and G. Moon, 'Speaking in Tongues: A Survey of the New Testament Evidence', *Churchman* 80.4, 1966, 293–94. A. J. M. Wedderburn, 'Romans 8:26—Towards a Theology of Glossolalia?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, 1975, 371, denies that Paul intends to refer to glossolalia in this text, but argues that it may be re-applied to glossolalia *inter alia*. Also see: G. D. Fee, 'Toward a Pauline Theology of Glossolalia', in W. Ma & R. P. Menzies (eds.), *Pentecostalism in Context: Essays in Honour of William W. Menzies* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, JPTS 11, 1997) 24–37.

2 Mk. 16:17 (longer ending); Acts 2:4, 6, 8, 11; 10:46; 19:6.

nal and simply alternatives is uncertain.³ However, the Markan version (γλώσσαις λαλήσουσιν καιναῖς—16:17) belongs to the 'longer ending' of the gospel which many scholars regard as being a later and an unoriginal ending.⁴

However, this paper does not attempt to deal extensively with exegetical matters. Its aim is to give an overview of the main issues. Therefore, *it is the intention of this article to survey the main scholarly contributions to this discussion and to make some judgments as to what may and may not be said concerning the nature and function of New Testament glossolalia.* By 'nature' I mean the essence or character of the phenomenon. By 'function' I mean the purpose or use to which the phenomenon may be put. The wider theological and contemporary studies of Christian glossolalia remain outside the scope of this article.

The linguistic nature of glossolalia

One of the central questions which commentators have concerned themselves with is the linguistic nature of New Testament glossolalia.⁵ There appear to be a number of options. These are:

- (1) Paul and Luke thought that glossolalia was miraculous ability to speak unlearned human languages;⁶
- (2) Paul thought glossolalia was the miraculous ability to speak heavenly languages;⁷

3 C. Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment* (Peabody, Hendrickson, 1997) 73–74.

4 W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974, NICNT) 601–605; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1959).

5 T. W. Harpur, 'The Gift of Tongues and Interpretation', *Canadian Journal of Theology* 12.3, 1966, 168; however, he regards this question as being 'left open' by Paul.

6 This is a traditional view, see: D. Greene, 'The Gift of Tongues', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 22, 1865, 99; J. D. Davies, 'Pentecost and Glossolalia', *Journal of Theological Studies* 3, 1952, 228–231 (who also sees Pentecost as a reversal of Babel); J. Massingberd Ford, 'Toward A Theology of "Speaking in Tongues"', *Theological Studies* 32, 1971, 16; C. F. Robertson, 'The Nature of New Testament Glossolalia' (Dallas, Dallas Theological Seminary, ThD diss., 1975) *passim*; R. H. Gundry, ' "Ecstatic Utterance" (NEB)?', *Journal of Theological Studies* 17.2, 1966, 299–307.

7 E. E. Ellis, ' "Spiritual" Gifts in the Pauline Community', *New Testament Studies* 20, 1973–74, 128–144, esp. 138, argues that 'spirits' in 1 Cor. 14 refers to the belief that angelic spiritual beings mediated tongues and prophecy, which reinforces the case for angelic languages; cf. G. D. Fee, 'Tongues—Least of the Gifts? Some Exegetical Observations on 1 Corinthians 12–14', *Pneuma* 2, 1980, 8, who draws on the *Testament of Job* 48–52; G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to The Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987) and G. D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Hendrickson, 1994) 24–26. J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London, SCM, 1975) 243–44, also contrasts inspired speech in the vernacular with angelic tongues. He argues that the content of these angelic tongues is 'mysteries' (1 Cor. 13:2), i.e. eschatological secrets of heaven. A similar argument is advocated by D. B.

(3) for Paul glossolalia was some form of combination of (1) and (2);⁸

(4) Paul thought that glossolalia was a kind of sub- or pre-linguistic form of speech, possibly a coded utterance, similar to but not identical with speech, but nevertheless capable of conveying meaning;⁹

(5) Paul thought glossolalia was idiosyncratic language, a dialect for prayer, in which archaic and foreign terms dominated;¹⁰

(6) whatever Paul and Luke thought,¹¹ glossolalia was in fact unintelligible speech, perhaps with a small number of authentic foreign words occurring;¹²

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- 7 (continued) Martin, 'Tongues of Angels and Other Status Indicators', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59.3, 1991, 559, who regards 1 Cor. 13.1 as a rhetorical construction. For responses to this position, see: Gundry, '“Ecstatic Utterance” (NEB)?', 301; M. Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spirit Gifts Then and Now* (Carlisle, Paternoster, 1996) 228; D. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1987) 82; and Forbes, *Prophecy*, 61–63. While E. Best, 'The Interpretation of Tongues', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, 1975, 47, regards 'tongues of angels' to be a Corinthian phrase which Paul picks up but in order to emphasis the importance of love.
- 8 R. Banks and G. Moon, 'Speaking in Tongues', 279, regard glossolalia as: 'the ability to speak spiritual languages which might be either the language of men or of angels'; S. Tugwell, 'The Gift of Tongues in the New Testament', *The Expository Times* 84, 1973, 137, who regards speaking in tongues as 'genuinely linguistic phenomena, which may or may not be identified by someone present as some definite language, but which do not convey any ordinary semantic significance to the speaker himself'. Fee, while on the one hand wishing to deny actual earthly languages in favour of heavenly languages, is forced to admit on the other hand that the context and especially 1 Cor. 13:1 suggest two kinds of language are in view: earthly and heavenly/angelic. He argues that the Corinthians understood their glossolalia to be heavenly and therefore as evidence of their future heavenly status. See: Fee, 'Toward a Pauline Theology of Glossolalia' 32–33; and Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 197–202, 890.
- 9 Carson, *Showing*, 84–87, who bases his interpretation on V. S. Poythress, 'Linguistic and Sociological Analyses of Modern Tongues-Speaking: Their Contribution and Limitations', *Westminster Theological Journal* 42, 1979, 369.
- 10 F. W. Beare, 'Speaking With Tongues: A Critical Survey of the New Testament Evidence', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83, 1964, 243; S. D. Currie, '“Speaking in Tongues” Early Evidence Outside the New Testament Bearing on “Glyōmssais Lalein”', *Interpretation* 19, 1965 280ff; and Forbes, *Prophecy*, 60.
- 11 It has been argued that the difference in terminology between Luke and Paul leads to the conclusion that while Luke interpreted Pentecost tongues to be foreign languages, this was in fact a secondary reading which was unhistorical and determined by theological interest, so E. Best, 'The Interpretation of Tongues', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, 1975, 55. Indeed some suggest that Luke may have not had any first-hand knowledge of glossolalia, e.g. D. M. Smith, 'Glossolalia and Other Spiritual Gifts in a New Testament Perspective', *Interpretation* 28, 1974, 314; also see F. W. Beare, 'Speaking With Tongues' 234–40, for a symbolic interpretation of Acts.
- 12 C. Clemens, 'The “Speaking With Tongues” of the Early Christians', *The Expository Times* 10, 1898–99, 344–52, suggests that Corinthian glossolalia was 'for the most part unintelligible' (348), while Pentecost glossolalia was expressed 'if not in inarticulate sounds, yet in unconnected words and sentences' (351); I. J. Martin, 'Glossolalia in the Apostolic Church', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63, 1944, 123–30; also see:

- (7) the Apostles spoke fragments of Hebrew texts;¹³
 (8) people spoke various Greek dialects;¹⁴
 (9) Corinthian tongues were enigmatic 'dark sayings';¹⁵
 (10) glossolalia comprised 'cadences of vocalization which did not constitute discourse';¹⁶
 (11) Corinthian tongues were unintelligible due to their manner of delivery (involving spontaneity, excitement and incoherence);¹⁷
 (12) the real miracle in Acts 2 was not one of speaking but of hearing, as the hearers were given the ability to understand a language or unintelligible speech that was otherwise incomprehensible.¹⁸

V. S. Poythress asks three distinct questions. First, what did the Corinthians perceive to be the linguistic nature of glossolalia? Second, what classification would a modern scientific approach use? And third, how did Paul classify the phenomenon linguistically?

In terms of the first question he argues that most, if not all, of the phenomenon would have been understood in terms of 'a connected sequence of sounds that sounded to them like a human language that they did not know', although the possibility that they might have known the language (e.g. in terms of Greek, Latin or a minority language) is left open.¹⁹

With regard to the second question, he argues that the major alternatives concerning Corinthian glossolalia include options (1) although unknown to the assembly it is known somewhere in the world, (4), (6) and (10) above, as well as a further option, that is:

- 12 (*continued*) C. Williams, 'Glossolalia as a Religious Phenomenon: "Tongues" at Corinth and Pentecost', *Religion* 5.1, 1975, 16–32; and C. Williams, *Tongues of the Spirit* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1981) ch. 2. W. E. Mills, *A Theological/Exegetical Approach to Glossolalia* (Lanham, University Press of America, 1985) 69, suggests such authentic phrases may have been known, e.g. 'Jesus is Lord' or 'Abba/Father'.
- 13 L. Dewar, 'The Problem of Pentecost', *Theology* 9, 1924, 249–259.
- 14 H. E. Edwards, 'The Tongues at Pentecost: A Suggestion', *Theology* 16, 1928, 248–52.
- 15 S. D. Currie, ' "Speaking in Tongues" ', 294.
- 16 Currie, ' "Speaking in Tongues" ', 294.
- 17 B. L. Smith, 'Tongues in the New Testament', *Churchman* 87.4, 1973, 287; cf. W. Richardson, 'Liturgical Order and Glossolalia in 1 Corinthians 14.26c–33a', *New Testament Studies* 32, 1986, 148.
- 18 J. Everts, 'Tongues or Languages? Contextual Consistency in the Translation of Acts 2', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 4, 1994, 71–80; L. T. Johnson, 'Glossolalia and the Embarrassments of Experience', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 18.2, 1997, 117. Alternatively, that the Apostles used Greek and cited quotations from the Scriptures which Luke describes as a miracle of hearing, see: R. O. P. Taylor, 'The Tongues of Pentecost', *The Expository Times* 40, 1928–29, 302. However, τῆ ἰδί διαλέκτῳ (Acts 2:6) does not necessarily indicate a miracle of hearing since it belonged to the believers rather than the unbelievers. That is, Luke is more concerned with what is happening to the believers rather than the crowd, so Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 223, and Carson, *Showing*, 138.
- 19 V. S. Poythress, 'The Nature of Corinthian Glossolalia: Possible Options', *Westminster Theological Journal* 40, 1977–78, 132.

(13) 'a piece without fragments from known human language, having linguistic deviations from patterns common to human languages, yet being indistinguishable by a naïve listener from a foreign language'.²⁰ He argues that much of modern glossolalia can be classified by option (13), with a few cases of (6). While option (1) is regarded as a possibility, nevertheless, 'with the available evidence, there seems to be no hope of deciding between alternatives [(4), (6) and (13)], or showing that several of them occurred at Corinth'.²¹ Concerning the third question, Poythress suggests that Paul's use of λαλεῖν γλώσση meant that he regarded glossolalia as language-like, probably similar to options (1), (4) (6) and (13). Paul regarded these phenomena as at least intelligible to God (1 Cor. 14:2). However, neither Paul nor the Corinthians would have been able to distinguish between these types by natural means available to them.²² Furthermore, Poythress argues that Paul was not interested in the precise linguistic nature of glossolalia. Rather he was more interested in affirming glossolalia as a gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12.10,30) and in focusing upon proper and improper use (1 Cor. 14:26–33a,39–40).²³

These options may be simplified, as suggested by C. Forbes, into two main ones. Either (1) both Luke and Paul considered glossolalia to be unlearned human language (with perhaps angelic speech as well);²⁴ or (2) they both considered the phenomenon to be inarticulate speech.²⁵ He argues that the weight of evidence suggests that (1) is the preferred interpretation. Luke certainly appears to portray glossolalia on the day of Pentecost as xenolalia (Acts 2:6,8,11).²⁶ While inarticulate speech

20 Poythress, 'The Nature of Corinthian Glossolalia', 133.

21 Poythress, 'The Nature of Corinthian Glossolalia', 133.

22 Poythress, 'The Nature of Corinthian Glossolalia', 133.

23 Poythress, 'The Nature of Corinthian Glossolalia', 134.

24 The view that Paul must have thought of tongues as *primarily* a heavenly language is also implausible for Forbes. This is because the angels of 1 Cor. 13.1 look like a rhetorical tool and as such provides a 'flimsy exegetical peg' *Prophecy*, 62; so Gundry 'Ecstatic Utterance' (NEB)?, 301.

25 The third possibility is a mixture of the two: that Luke considered 'other tongues' to be xenolalia, while Paul understood 'tongues' to be unintelligible and inarticulate glossolalia. J. H. Michael, 'The Gift of Tongues at Corinthians', *The Expositor* 4, 1907, 252–66, argues that while the earlier phenomenon of Pentecost was indeed xenolalia, Paul retains the same terminology but that the phenomenon had changed. While B. L. Smith, 'Tongues in the New Testament', *Churchman* 87.4, 1973, 285, regards the absence of the adjective 'other' in Acts 10 and 19 to indicate that 'the speakers were using their own language (however unusually)'.

26 So R. P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1994, JPTS 6) 177; and M. Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, JPTS 9) 271. But also observe that Turner asserts that glossolalia as xenolalia (recognized foreign languages) 'is found nowhere else in Acts' (357), contra Robertson, 'The Nature of New Testament Glossolalia', who assumes that this is obviously the case, 30–37.

can explain Paul's reference to speakers of different languages as being foreign in terms of metaphor, the reference to 'tongues of men' (1 Cor. 13:1) cannot be so explained. Nevertheless, this sort of interpretation has been challenged by A. C. Thiselton, who suggests that ἔρμηνεύω could mean 'to articulate' or 'to put into words' something which was previously inarticulate rather than 'to translate'.²⁷ However, some would argue that while Thiselton has shown that ἔρμηνεύω (and διερμηνεύω) might be understood in this way, he has not demonstrated that *Paul* understood and used the verb in that sense.²⁸

The religious and contextual background to Corinthian glossolalia

The question of the background to Corinthian glossolalia is also related to the problem at Corinth which prompted the correspondence in the first place.²⁹ There have been a variety of proposals concerning this question:

(1) tongues were prized since they were known to be associated with the apostles at Pentecost;³⁰

(2) tongues were a result of Jewish-Christian pressure to manifest 'Palestinian piety';³¹

(3) tongues themselves were the problem;³²

(4) tongues were highly prized, rather than the problem being a matter of practice;³³

(5) tongues were preferred over prophecy;³⁴

27 A. C. Thiselton, 'The "Interpretation" of Tongues: A New Suggestion in the Light of Greek Usage in Philo and Josephus', *Journal of Theological Studies* 30, 1979, 15–36. This interpretation is supported by L. T. Johnson, 'Glossolalia and the Embarrassments of Experience', 118, and W. Richardson, 'Liturgical Order and Glossolalia', 150.

28 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 70; so Turner who says that Paul parallels γλώσσαις λαλεῖν and ἑτερογλώσσοι (foreign languages) of Is. 28:11, *The Holy Spirit*, 227–28.

29 For a more detailed survey, see Forbes, *Prophecy*, ch. 2.

30 John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians 29:1 and 35:1; and Forbes, *Prophecy*, 12, ch. 7.

31 J. P. M. Sweet, 'A Sign for Believers: Paul's Attitude to Glossolalia', *New Testament Studies* 13, 1966–67, 246; cf. D. Walker, *The Gift of Tongues and Other Essays* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1906) ch. 1, who argues that the 'over-development' of glossolalia at Corinth was due to the 'Christ-party' from Jerusalem; cf. B. L. Smith, 'Tongues in the New Testament', 286.

32 F. W. Beare, 'Speaking With Tongues', 244, who says of Paul that 'he certainly seeks to direct the energies of Christians into other channels and insists that there are other ways of serving God in the power of his Spirit, which will be of far more benefit to the church'.

33 D. M. Smith, 'Glossolalia and Other Spiritual Gifts', 312; J. W. MacGorman, 'Glossolalic Error and Its Correction: 1 Corinthians 12–14', *Review and Expositor* 80.3, 1983, 391.

34 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 13, cites G. Dautzenberg, 'Glossolalie', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 11, 1981, columns 228, 238–39.

- (6) there was a power struggle between glossolalics and prophets;³⁵
 (7) tongues were a manifestation of misdirected individualism;³⁶
 (8) the problem itself is over-estimated;³⁷
 (9) it was part of the larger dispute between Paul and the Corinthians over Gnosticism;³⁸
 (10) it was part of the problem of over-realized eschatology at Corinth;³⁹
 (11) it was due to the influence of Hellenistic-Jewish speculation about σοφία;⁴⁰
 (12) the Corinthians over-evaluated glossolalia because of their experience of similar phenomena in Hellenistic religion.⁴¹

While the majority of New Testament scholars have tended to see the Corinthian glossolalia as emerging out of ecstatic unintelligible speech of Hellenistic antiquity,⁴² Harrisville contends that Jewish apocalypticism was the appropriate background, which did not distinguish between unintelligible ecstatic speech and glossolalia.⁴³ However, with the lack of evidence from this source, most have turned to Hellenism or a general background of ecstaticism.⁴⁴ Hellenism has therefore been felt to provide the clearest parallel to 1 Corinthians' uninterpreted glossolalia. The parallel which is most used is the ecstatic and unintelligible utterances of the Delphic priestess, which is subsequently interpreted

35 Johanson, 'Tongues, A Sign for Unbelievers?', 196.

36 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 13.

37 W. C. van Unnik, 'The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 12.31', *Novum Testamentum*, 35.2, 1993, 143–44, suggests that 1 Cor. 12–14 is not polemical.

38 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 14, cites W. Schmithals.

39 A. C. Thiselton, 'Realized Eschatology at Corinth', *New Testament Studies* 24.4, 1978, 510–526; cf. G. D. Fee, 'Tongues—Least of the Gifts?', 7.

40 R. A. Horsley, 'Pneumatikos vs. Psychikos: Distinctions of Spiritual Status among the Corinthians', *Harvard Theological Review* 69, 1976, 269–88; cf. Forbes, *Prophecy*, 14.

41 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 16, citing, W. C. Klein, 'The Church and its Prophets', *Anglican Theological Review* 44.1, 1962, 7.

42 See Forbes, *Prophecy*, ch. 2 for a survey of scholarship. V. S. Poythress, 'The Nature of Corinthian Glossolalia', 130, observes that Gundry has confused the psychological state of 'ecstasy' with the linguistic product. Theoretically, the Corinthians *could* have spoken ecstatically in xenolalia!

43 Harrisville, 'Speaking in Tongues', 47; cf. W. E. Mills, *A Theological/Exegetical Approach to Glossolalia*, 94, who suggests that the primary background to glossolalia is Hebraic rather than Hellenistic. He nevertheless regards the phenomenon as ecstatic.

44 J. Behm, 'γλῶσσα, ἑτερόγλωσσοσ', in G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964) Vol 1, 722–24; Williams, *Tongues of the Spirit*, ch. 1; C. G. Williams, 'Ecstasism in Hebrew prophecy and Christian glossolalia', *Studies in Religion* 3, 1973–74, 320–338; W. E. Mills, 'Ecstasism as a Background for Glossolalia', *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 27, 1975, 167–171; cf. N. G. Aubrey, 'Glossolalia: An Enquiry into its Background, Development and Significance' (Macquarie University, PhD diss., 1991).

by a prophet.⁴⁵ Forbes, has considered such parallels in great detail. He argues that at the cult centres cited, inspiration does not lead to linguistic unintelligibility. The frenzied speech usually associated with the Mystery Religions (Cybele and Dionysus) provide no suitable parallel to the Corinthians tongues.⁴⁶ This is supported by no effective parallel in other types of popular Hellenistic religion.⁴⁷ This means that speaking in tongues within the early church was a *religious novum*.⁴⁸ Therefore the argument that Corinthian glossolalia and prophecy originated in the pre-Christian religious experience of the Corinthians is based on weak evidence, 'since it is difficult to parallel many features of early Christian enthusiasm *at all* within Hellenistic religion and culture'.⁴⁹

On the specific question of whether Corinthian glossolalia was ecstatic, the question depends largely on what one means by ecstatic.⁵⁰ Such labelling assumes that the Corinthian phenomenon did belong to the range of ecstatic unintelligible utterances of Hellenistic religion. Gundry is one scholar who has differentiated Christian glossolalia from the ecstatic unintelligible speech of Hellenistic religion.⁵¹ Indeed the modern understanding of the term 'ecstatic' is not necessarily identical with the meaning of the Greek word ἔκστατικός. Some scholars tend to use it in the modern sense of frenzy or trance.⁵² Others

45 So Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* 242; M. E. Hart, 'Speaking in Tongues and Prophecy as Understood by Paul and at Corinth, with Reference to Early Christian Usage', (University of Durham, PhD diss., 1975) 13–14; cf. Forbes, *Prophecy*, ch. 5.

46 Contra, e.g., H. W. House, 'Tongues and the Mystery Religions of Corinth', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140, 1983, 134–50; cf. Forbes, *Prophecy*, ch. 6.

47 Forbes, *Prophecy*, ch. 7; although it must be noted that D. B. Martin has criticised Forbes's phenomenology by arguing that he has defined too narrowly what he is looking for. This means, naturally, that he does not find parallels to it in Hellenism. See D. B. Martin, 'Tongues of Angels and Other Status Indicators', 548.

48 Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 237; although elsewhere Turner argues that despite glossolalia being unknown to Judaism, 'invasive charismatic praise was a prototypical gift—and might be anticipated occasionally, especially in connection with either the initial reception of the Spirit or with some dramatic irruption of the Spirit on people. Within this conceptual context, glossolalia would readily enough have been regarded as a special form of doxological prophetic speech . . .', *Power*, 271, and ch. 3; cf. Ford, 'Towards a Theology', 21.

49 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 5.

50 So Carson, *Showing*, 78; and Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 237; indeed, Robertson argues that when *μαίνομαι* appears it is in contrast to the ideal function of glossolalia (1 Cor. 14:23); and that ἔκστασις as a biblical term means nothing more than a mild inner rapture of the human spirit, which must be determined contextually, 'The Nature of New Testament Glossolalia', 158.

51 Gundry, '“Ecstatic Utterance” (NEB)?' *passim*, Forbes, *Prophecy*, 79; cf. L. T. Johnson, 'Glossolalia and the Embarrassments of Experience', 118–119.

52 E.g. I. J. Martin, 'Glossolalia in the Apostolic Church', 127; Behm, and Beare, contra D. M. Smith, 'Glossolalia and other Spiritual Gifts', 318–19; S. Tugwell, 'The Gift of Tongues in the New Testament', *The Expository Times* 84, 1973, 137; and R. H. Gundry, '“Ecstatic Utterance” (N.E.B.)?', 299–307.

interpret the term more generally as a synonym for being 'inspired'.⁵³ W. Grudem argues for four tests of whether a speech is ecstatic, which would include incomprehensible speech and therefore glossolalia.⁵⁴ D. E. Aune suggests a typology based on the anthropological concept of 'altered states of consciousness', which include the categories of: (1) 'possession trance', and (2) 'vision trance'. The first is caused by external spiritual beings while the second is caused by visions and 'out of the body experiences'. These are further divided into: (1) controlled and (2) uncontrolled states.⁵⁵ However, to use such anthropological categories is also to interpret ancient phenomenon with a modern sense. When scholars assert that glossolalia was ecstatic and thereby coerced speech, they do not take seriously the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:28.⁵⁶ Glossolalia was no more ecstatic than prophecy.⁵⁷

We conclude this section with a summary drawn from Forbes as to the problem of glossolalia at Corinth.⁵⁸

He argues that the problem concerned the exaltation of glossolalia above other works of the Spirit which benefitted the church community (1 Cor. 12:12–31). Those who practised glossolalia were exalted and secured their status within the community as pneumatics.⁵⁹ This meant that divisions within the church were either caused or exacerbated by glossolalia.⁶⁰ Paul argues that tongues are not a special sign of anything among believers, including pneumatic elitist status. Rather, tongues at best are a negative sign to unbelievers. This behaviour therefore alienates and excludes unbelievers. This way of practising prophecy leads to disorder and the exclusion of some people to the

53 E.g. P. Roberts, 'A Sign—Christian or Pagan?', *The Expository Times* 90, 1978–79, 201; Williams, 'Glossolalia as a Religious Phenomenon', 21.

54 W. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 1988) 124–25; although Forbes, *Prophecy*, 54., regards this as being too ambiguous. Cf. T. Callan, 'Prophecy and Ecstasy in Greco-Roman Religion and in Corinthians', *Novum Testamentum* 27.2, 1985, 125–140; Carson, *Showing*, 77–79.

55 D. E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983) 19–20; Forbes, *Prophecy*, 55.

56 So D. L. Baker, 'The Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12–14', *Evangelical Quarterly* 46, 1974, 229.

57 Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 238; also Banks and Moon, 'Speaking in Tongues', 290; contra L. T. Johnson, 'Glossolalia and the Embarrassment of Experience', 121.

58 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 171–172.

59 For an important discussion of how glossolalia is linked to other social status indicators in an ancient context see: D. B. Martin, 'Tongues of Angels and Other Status Indicators', 547–589. Martin classifies glossolalia as 'esoteric speech'. Such speech, he argues, is usually associated with indicators of high social status such as education, socio-economic position and leadership.

60 There are some scholars who suggest that glossolalia was used in Corinth to focus the challenge of certain women to established male authority. See: L. T. Johnson, 'Glossolalia and the Embarrassment of Experience', 128–132; and A. C. Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995) 185.

loss of the church community. These charges by Paul would have been defended with the claim of prophetic/pneumatic status by those involved. To which Paul answered that the Spirit regulates and acts communally not individually.

Drawing on R. A. Horsley and J. A. Davies,⁶¹ Forbes goes on to suggest that the Corinthians probably learned their glossolalia from Paul himself which strengthened the esteem in which they held the gift. It was therefore associated with great Christian leaders and if they had known the tradition about the day of Pentecost they would have been confirmed in this view. Paul may or may not have taught about restraint during his time at Corinth. Nevertheless in his absence elitist tendencies became obvious and glossolalia and prophecy became marks of the spiritual elite and evidence of the Spirit in a mature Christian. The word πνευματικός was a Corinthian slogan which encapsulated experiences of πνεῦμα within an elitist theology. The polemic of 1 Corinthians 12–14 is directed against this πνευματικοί/τέλειοι (spiritual/mature) view.⁶²

Forbes summarises his position by saying:

For Paul glossolalia was simply one manifestation of the work of the Spirit among other manifestations. It was not the highest of these; nor, necessarily, was it the lowest. It was simply one among many. As such its function ought to have been the building up of the assembly as a whole: such upbuilding ought to include numerical increase, by way of the attraction, retention and conversion of interested non-believers, and also the edification of those who already believed. Some Corinthians, however, had made glossolalia a criterion by which (a) believers might be identified from among non-believers, the boundaries of the community being thus defined, and (b) the truly mature, the πνευματικοί or τέλειοι, might be identified from among their lesser brethren. Thus the boundary within the community between the elite and non-elite members was defined. In other words they had used it as a form of behaviour that differentiated between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', both with regard to the community in relation to the wider world, and with regard to relationships within the community itself. Such a view explains Paul's double objection to glossolalia used without interpretation: it excludes and alienates 'unbelievers and those who do not understand', and it does not 'build up' believers.⁶³

61 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 172; cf. R. A. Horsley, 'Pneumatikos vs. Psychikos', 269–88; J. A. Davies, *Wisdom and Spirit: An Investigation of 1 Corinthians 1.18–3.20 Against the Background of Jewish Sapiential Traditions in the Greco-Roman Period* (Lanham, University Press of America, 1984).

62 N. Johansson, '1 Cor. 13 and 1 Cor. 14', *New Testament Studies* 10, 1964, 383–92, considers Paul's response in light of Agape.

63 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 173–74.

The purpose of glossolalia

The purpose or function of tongues has been considered by the two most recent commentators on the subject. Therefore, I shall use their discussion as a basis for this survey. In terms of its purpose, M. Turner suggests that speaking in tongues functions (1) as a sign, (2) for building up the church, and (3) as an aid to private devotion. Since these areas are also covered by Forbes it is useful to consider his work alongside that of Turner.

The idea that glossolalia was primarily a sign is a commonly held view. Seen in these terms it is usually considered to be a miracle which draws attention to something else.⁶⁴ This view is either based on Acts 2:11: 'wonders in heaven above, and signs on the earth below', which is interpreted by Luke as a sign of the fulfilment of prophecy;⁶⁵ or it is based on 1 Cor. 14:20–25. Here it has been understood as: (1) a sign of God's judgment on unbelieving Jews;⁶⁶ (2) a sign of God's judgment on unbelievers generally;⁶⁷ (3) a sign of covenantal rejection of national Israel;⁶⁸ (4) a sign of divine attitude or spiritual activity, its nature being unspecified by the terminology;⁶⁹ and (5) being impossible to define how Paul interpreted the sign value of glossolalia

64 Greene, 'The Gift of Tongues', 121; W. G. Bellshaw, 'The Confusion of Tongues', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120, 1963, 145–53; Forbes, *Prophecy*, 93; Robertson, 'The Nature of New Testament Glossolalia', 38–45, 93–99; also see the discussion of the Reformed position that tongues are a sign-gift to aid evangelism by Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 230; liberal interpretations have tended to view glossolalia as referring to 'ecstatic speech', which Luke used (without historical accuracy) 'as a narrative device for making visible the direction of the Spirit at major turning points in the Church's mission', O. C. Edwards, 'The Exegesis of Acts 8:4–25 and Its Implications for Confirmation and Glossolalia: A Review Article on Haenchen's Acts Commentary', *Anglican Theological Review* 55, 1973, 111–12.

65 R. P. Menzies, *Empowered for Witness*, ch. 13; Turner regards glossolalia on the day of Pentecost as evidence of the bestowal of the 'Spirit of Prophecy' (Joel 3:1–2). The Spirit, he interprets, as 'the executive power of the exalted messiah for the restoration of Israel' *Power*, (268). As such 'other tongues' functions as one sign of this significant event.

66 S. L. Johnson, 'The Gift of Tongues and the Book of Acts', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120, 1963, 309–11; O. P. Robertson, 'Tongues: Sign of Covenantal Curse and Blessing', *Westminster Theological Journal* 38, 1975–76, 43–53; Bellshaw, 'The Confusion of Tongues', 148; Z. C. Hodges, 'The Purpose of Tongues', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120, 1963, 226–308.

67 MacGorman, 'Glossolalic Error', 398; Behm, 'γλῶσσαι', 726–27.

68 O. P. Robertson, 'Tongues', 43–53; although Forbes regards his case as a refinement of options (1) and (2), Forbes, *Prophecy*, 94.

69 W. Grudem, '1 Corinthians 14:20–25: Prophecy and Tongues as Signs of God's Attitude', *Westminster Theological Journal* 41, 1979, 381–396. P. Roberts, 'A Sign—Christian or Pagan?', *The Expository Times* 90, 1978–79, 199–203, argues along similar lines but with different conclusions to Grudem.

since Paul's use of this terminology is to echo and respond to his opponents.⁷⁰

Turner argues for the fourth view. In 1 Corinthians 14:22 Paul states that tongues are a sign not to believers but to unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not to unbelievers but believers. On the basis of this view, Turner argues, in agreement with W. Grudem, that the word *σημεῖον* has a double meaning in the Septuagint (LXX).⁷¹ That is, it can refer to a 'sign' either of God's blessing on his covenant people and/or of his judgment on unbelievers. Paul's citation of Is. 28:11 is interpreted to mean that since Israel did not listen to God when he spoke clearly, he will now speak through a foreign language of an invading army. Paul uses this to convey to the Corinthians the idea that speaking in tongues without interpretation would similarly function as a sign of judgment since God refuses to speak in a comprehensible language. Prophecy, however, is 'God's self-revealing and communicating presence',⁷² and as such is a sign of blessing. In Grudem's view tongues on their own do not constitute a positive sign to unbelievers (although if interpreted this would be the case). Rather, Grudem believes that if tongues are taken mistakenly to function as a sign to unbelievers then they do so negatively.⁷³ Paul does not regard this as their proper purpose, therefore he prescribes that they be used only with interpretation. This approximates to the positive sign value of prophecy. However, this is a concession by Paul and their real purpose must be looked for elsewhere.⁷⁴

70 So Sweet, 'A Sign for Unbelievers', 241, who suggests that Paul is taking up a Corinthian slogan: αἱ γλῶσσαι εἰς σημεῖον τοῖς πιστευουσιν; B. C. Johanson, 'Tongues, A Sign for Unbelievers?: A Structural and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians XIV. 20-25', *New Testament Studies* 25, 1979, 193, who regards that Paul uses v. 22 in the form of a rhetorical question using the Corinthian slogan. Contra T. W. Gillespie, *The First Theologians: A Study in Early Christian Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994) 160, who asserts that since 'Paul coined the technical term "tongues" *ad hoc* in order to deal with the situation in Corinth, the phrase, "tongues are a sign" may not be identified as a Corinthian slogan that Paul is repeating back to them'.

71 Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 230; W. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 1988) ch. 8; and W. Grudem, '1 Corinthians 14:20-25'; cf. D. E. Lanier, 'With Stammering Lips and Another Tongue: 1 Cor. 14:20-22 and Is. 28:11-12', *Criswell Theological Review* 5.2, 1991, 273, 281.

72 Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 231.

73 See further the discussion by G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987, NICNT) 679-683. For a useful summary of the main exegetical positions see: Carson, *Showing*, 108-117; but also see: D. E. Lanier, 'With Stammering Lips and Another Tongue', 259-286; and J. F. M. Smit, 'Tongues and Prophecy: Deciphering 1 Cor. 14:22', *Biblica* 75.2, 1994, 175-90 for a rhetorical approach to the problem; and Forbes, *Prophecy*, 175-181.

74 The relationship between 'Baptism in the Spirit' and speaking in tongues as its evidence is the classical Pentecostal position. It is based on a reading of the material from Acts 2,8,10 and 19. For a recent statement of the Pentecostal position see, R. Menzies, *Empowered by Witness*, ch.13, but for a rebuttal see Turner. Turner's

Second, Turner interprets Paul as saying that tongues on their own do not edify the church. He nevertheless allows that tongues with interpretation can function similarly to prophecy and build up the church (1 Cor. 14:5c; 14:25).⁷⁵ Indeed, this is commended with moderation (1 Cor. 14:27,28,39). But Turner does not believe that this is what Paul regards as being the *main* purpose of tongues.

Forbes wishes to give a slightly more prominent role to this feature because he understands that glossolalia is seen by both Luke and Paul as being revelatory, especially, although not exclusively, when interpreted. This view is often held alongside other views mentioned above. Some argue that glossolalia had one set of functions when interpreted, and another set when uninterpreted.⁷⁶ The view that Luke saw glossolalia as revelatory is evident from the way in which he assumes that glossolalia and other forms of inspired speech have a close relationship. Forbes argues that Paul clearly believed that glossolalia was revelatory. This can be deduced from the observation that when tongues are interpreted they edify the congregation, similar to prophecy, therefore both glossolalia and prophecy have parallel functions when glossolalia is interpreted.⁷⁷ That is why Paul stresses the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 14:5b,27–28,29–30). Also, glossolalia is connected in 1 Cor. 14.2 with ‘mysteries’. The word *μυστήριον* is usually a term of revelation in Paul.⁷⁸ The inspired prayer and praise are related to revelations of God’s secret purposes, now being revealed, i.e. mysteries. In this function its preferred use is private.⁷⁹

Third, the idea that glossolalia is a private aid to devotion is advocated by Turner as the main purpose of tongues by Paul.⁸⁰ While the

74 (*continued*) conclusion is that Luke considered invasive charismatic speech (in tongues or the recipient’s native language) occasionally to mark conversational Spirit-reception. The argument that Luke thought that this association was regular is thought to be unlikely, so Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 226.

75 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 658–660; Carson, *Showing*, 102–103. T. W. Gillespie, ‘A Pattern of Prophetic Speech in First Corinthians’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 1, 1978, 74–95, argues, using the account of prophecy provided by Celsus and cited by Origen, that glossolalia functioned to legitimise or confirm the prophetic message. For a response to this interpretation, see Forbes, *Prophecy*, 165–68.

76 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 95.

77 Forbes is dismissive of those views which plays down the role of the interpretation of tongues as a factor in the scenario (so Turner, Mills, Stendahl), *Prophecy*, 97. He argues that the interpretation of tongues as a gift is equally inspired, thus making the content of tongues (whether praise in Acts 2, or mysteries in 1 Cor. 14) available to the congregation (100). 1 Cor. 14:5b and 1 Cor. 14:13 suggest that the speaker should interpret (so Barratt, Thiselton, Kleinknecht, Friedrich), but 1 Cor. 14:27 suggests that another should interpret. Perhaps Paul expected the speaker to be the primary interpreter but was expectant of others to do so as well, so Forbes, *Prophecy*, 101.

78 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 96–97.

79 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 98.

80 So Richardson, ‘Liturgical Order and Glossolalia’, 151.

gift may edify the congregation if interpreted, it edifies the individual in private more directly. 'As doxological speech, or prayer, one would anticipate the gift would be better described as "God-centred" than "self-centred"'.⁸¹ Paul, while banning the uninterpreted phenomenon from the assembly, recognises that it is a genuine form of speaking to God (1 Cor. 14:2,28). However, unless tongues are interpreted they remain 'only to God' and cannot edify the congregation. This means, therefore, that Paul considers private use to be appropriate use. This is further encouraged when Paul 'commands that if *glossai* are not interpreted the speaker should then be silent in church; he should speak rather "to himself and to God". As it is improbable that Paul is counselling private use of tongues in church when another is ministering, this seems to be a positive injunction to private use.'⁸²

Similarly, Forbes, argues that glossolalia is also inspired prayer and praise, that is praying/singing 'in the Spirit' (1 Cor. 14:15) and 'blessing in the Spirit' (1 Cor. 14:16): a form of devotional practice, directed to God (1 Cor. 14:2),⁸³ which is sometimes practised corporately,⁸⁴ and which Paul wishes to restrict to private use.⁸⁵ Although some have suggested that even this restriction is a concession and that Paul's real view is that all glossolalia is self-indulgent.⁸⁶

Therefore, Turner concludes that Paul understood tongues to fulfil a doxological and revelatory role to the congregation when accompanied by interpretation but that the *major* role was a private one where the individual used it as an aid in private devotion.⁸⁷ However, Forbes observes that while some prioritise Luke (Acts 2—often with 1 Cor. 14:20–25), others prioritise Paul.⁸⁸ But, he argues, Paul refers to different kinds of tongues (γένη γλωσσῶν, 1 Cor. 12:10,28); and that the question as to their social function in the New Testament depends on the context. Edification is of one's spirit (1 Cor. 14:4) and therefore is a non-cognitive kind. This may be considered inferior to cognitive

81 Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 233; Turner also suggests that the glossolalia in Acts was doxological and prophetic; 10:46 and 19:6 seem to indicate that a mixture is in evidence (224); Harpur, 'The Gift of Tongues and Interpretation', 169, Banks and Moon, 'Speaking in Tongues', 282, and Tugwell, 'The Gift of Tongues', 138, also regard glossolalia as a gift for praise.

82 Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 234; cf. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology* Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1990, 1996) 231–234.

83 Carson argues that in 1 Cor. 14 tongues are primarily addressed to God in prayer, but that in Acts 2 tongues are praise, *Showing*, 143.

84 The question as to whether Paul expected all to speak in tongues is raised by classical Pentecostals. The question is put in 1 Cor. 12:30, and suggests a negative answer was expected, so Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 235.

85 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 92–93.

86 So House, 'Tongues'; Forbes, *Prophecy*, 93.

87 Turner, *The Holy Spirit*, 234.

88 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 92.

edification but it is nevertheless real.⁸⁹ Whereas Turner focuses on the private devotional use as the main purpose of tongues in Paul, Forbes wishes to maintain a number of functions which can be used in different contexts. The reading of the other material is largely similar, but the emphasis in terms of priority is different. This is where they part company since Forbes wishes to maintain all three elements as distinct functions, while Turner prioritizes private usage.⁹⁰

Conclusion

In summarising the results of this survey, I have to admit that we do not really know what the linguistic nature of glossolalia was in the first century, only what Luke and Paul thought that it was.⁹¹ In terms of what they considered the linguistic nature of glossolalia to be the matter is relatively clear. Luke considered glossolalia to be real unlearned human languages (xenolalia), while Paul understood glossolalia to be either real unlearned human languages (xenolalia) or a mysterious kind of heavenly language which he called the 'language of angels' (this latter type may have been based on the rhetoric of the Corinthians themselves and which Paul uses). The idea that Paul could have lumped together xenolalia and the modern unintelligible phenomenon of glossolalia is, of course, possible, but it is beyond any kind of empirical investigation and therefore must remain speculative. In both cases Paul believed that glossolalia was communicative. However, this vehicle of communication was only understood by either the speaker or the human hearers when some form of 'interpretation' was given. In terms of xenolalia this would have been a translation, but for an angelic language it is, of course, impossible to say what the nature of the 'interpretation' was exactly. In either case the 'tongue' benefitted the speaker since his/her spirit was edified. But the human hearers were only edified when an interpretation mediated some cognitive meaning.

In terms of the function of glossolalia, there are quite distinct traits within the New Testament. For Luke, it was one of the signs of the end-time 'Spirit of Prophecy', which symbolised the restoration of Israel. This was extended to the Gentiles within the narrative of Acts, so

89 Forbes, *Prophecy*, 99.

90 For discussion of the cessation of tongues, see e.g. S. D. Toussaint, 'First Corinthians Thirteen and the Tongues Question', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120, 1963, 311–316; and Forbes, *Prophecy*, 85–91. Forbes argues for the consensus view that 'the perfect' (τὸ τέλειον) refers to the return of Christ, with no distinction to be drawn from the passive/middle voices of v. 8.

91 So Dunn, who says: 'What was Christian glossolalia? What did Paul think glossolalia was? These are two separate questions; but by the nature of the evidence it is not easy to keep them disentangled.', *Jesus and the Spirit*, 242.

that it symbolised the universal giving of the Spirit to all people. While for the spiritual elite of Corinth, it symbolised status and spiritual power. There is good reason to suggest that this might have also been linked to issues of gender as well. However, for Paul, it was a sign of God's blessing which, in the wrong circumstances, could also symbolise God's curse (as in the case of unbelievers overhearing tongues and being scandalised by God's grace). It can function in a revelatory sense when accompanied by the gift of interpretation. In such circumstances it approximates to prophecy, although the language Paul uses suggests that the content of such speech was praise and prayer and thus directed to God. Glossolalia also functions as a personal and private gift edifying the spirit of the person using it in private devotion. However, the prioritising of this function is open to doubt, since Paul clearly envisioned a number of functions of glossolalia at Corinth. In order to balance the extremes of the spiritual elite, Paul advocates either a more communal use of the gift (with interpretation) or a more privatised use. I would suggest that had it been used and controlled in the public context, the private context may not have been emphasised quite so much by Paul. There would have been no need.

Abstract

Questions concerning the nature and function of contemporary charismatic glossolalia abound. One of the main questions which Christian interpreters have, even if it is not articulated, concerns whether contemporary and New Testament glossolalia are one and the same. This paper does not answer this question directly, but it does enable the reader to be familiar with the New Testament side of the question. It does this by providing a detailed survey of the main views within New Testament scholarship. The present author is of the opinion that glossolalia within the narrative of Acts 2, and probably the remainder of Acts, is understood by Luke to be xenolalia. Following M. Turner and C. Forbes, it is argued that Paul in 1 Corinthians understood glossolalia in this way, but also with the additional category of 'angelic language'.