

# Glossolalia

by Joel C. Gerlach

A decade has passed since glossolalia became a subject of renewed interest in the Christian world. The early sixties mark the advent of neo-Pentecostalism together with the most notable feature of neo-Pentecostalism, the phenomenon of speaking in tongues. What once was confined almost exclusively to Pentecostal groups has now become almost commonplace among Christians of mainline denominations. As neo-Pentecostalism has spread, the subject of tongues-speaking has become one of endless discussion, debate, and controversy. Those who initially ignored it because they thought it was just another passing fad like the “death of God” movement misjudged the situation. The neo-Pentecostal movement has mushroomed, and the controversy ignited by it continues unabated. The phenomenon appears to be here to stay. Observers refer to it with increasing frequency as Christianity’s “third force” along with Catholicism and Protestantism.

Since the movement began in the West, then spread to the East, our people in the Midwest were initially isolated and insulated from it and therefore paid it scant attention. Now that it has become as popular and as widespread as it has throughout the country and, indeed, the world, we can no longer afford just to cock a curious eye at it and hope that it will go away without plaguing us. It will not. Two international conferences on the Holy Spirit sponsored by Lutherans in the heartland of Lutheranism have raised questions in the minds of our people about glossolalia.<sup>1</sup> They are earnest questions to which we must address ourselves earnestly. This study is an attempt to do so.

The division occasioned by tongues-speaking is an obvious one. Proponents regard it as a gift of the Spirit and an evidence of church renewal. They urge its promotion. Opponents regard it as a divisive influence that is causing harm in the body of Christ. They urge its curtailment. Some say, “Look at the ‘good’ it does! It must be a thing of God’s doing.” Others say, “Look at the harm it is causing! It must be a thing of the devil.” But our Lord does not tell us to determine the validity of a thing pragmatically. He requires us to determine that scripturally, which is what we propose to do with the Spirit’s enlightening help.

## I. Theologically Considered

### A. Etymological considerations

Glossolalia was a fact of life in the early church. There is no question about that. There are questions, however, about its nature, its extent, and its significance. In Corinth there is an additional question about its antecedents. Above all there is a question about the connection between the phenomenon of tongues in Jerusalem on Pentecost day and the practice of tongues in Corinth subsequently.

Surprisingly there are only three explicit post-Pentecost references to glossolalia in the New Testament, and only two of its twenty-seven books, Acts and First Corinthians, make reference to it. Thus it certainly does not occupy the place of prominence in Scripture that it does in the minds of glossolalists today. In Acts tongues are mentioned in the Pentecost story (2:4), in the account of the conversion of Cornelius (10:46), and in the account of the baptism of John’s disciples at Ephesus (19:6). In First Corinthians three chapters (12–14) deal with the problem of the abuse of tongues on the part of the Corinthian Christians. The terms employed by the holy writers are: “other tongues,” Acts 2:4; “tongues,” Acts 10 and 19 and in 17 passages in First Corinthians; “kinds of tongues,” 1 Corinthians 12:28; “interpretation of tongues,” 1 Corinthians 12:10; and “strange tongues,” 1 Corinthians 14:21. There is no textual warrant for the familiar but misleading translation “unknown tongues” in six verses of chapter 14 in the King James Version.

Mention must also be made of the reference to tongues-speaking in Mark 16:17–18. In a prophetic pronouncement accompanying the great commission, Jesus reportedly says to His disciples, “And these signs

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<sup>1</sup> International Lutheran Conference on the Holy Spirit, Minneapolis, 1972 and 1973. See “Zwickau Revisited,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, LXIX (Oct. 1972), 289f.

shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” The passage is frequently cited as a *sedes* by advocates of glossolalia. There is, however, a serious textual question involving verses 9 to 20, the so-called “long ending” of Mark’s Gospel. Ancient and reliable manuscripts as well as the early church fathers agree that verse 8 marks the end of the authentic text of Mark. Regardless of how one decides the textual problem for himself, it is clear that verse 17 cannot properly serve as a *sedes* for glossolalia. Even if one accepts the passage as authentic, the prophetic nature of the words of Jesus would preclude their usefulness in resolving any of the pertinent questions pertaining to glossolalia today. Those questions will have to be resolved on the basis of the Pentecost and post-Pentecost references.<sup>2</sup>

Glossolalia is a composite of *γλῶσσα* and *λαλέω*. The composite does not occur in Scripture. Bauer (Arndt-Gingrich)<sup>3</sup> and Kittel<sup>4</sup> cite three usages of the word *γλῶσσα* in the New Testament. 1. Literally *γλῶσσα* refers to the organ of the body designated as the tongue (cf. the account of the healing of the deaf and dumb man, Mk 7:33, “the string of his tongue was loosed,” and elsewhere). In the Pentecost story the flames of fire that appeared are described as “tongues,” a figurative sense. In that same chapter Peter quotes David as saying metonymically, “my tongue was glad.” Paul uses it similarly in Philipplans 2:11, “every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord.”

2. A second use of the word occurs in Acts 2:4,11 where Luke reports that the disciples began to speak with *ἑτέραις γλώσσαις*. Later the people respond to the phenomenon of Pentecost by saying they heard the disciples speak the wonderful works of God *ταῖς ἡμετέραις γλῶσσαις*. It is clear that *γλῶσσα* here means languages. This is confirmed by the reference to *διάλεκτος* in verses 6 and 8. In keeping with Old Testament usage, Bauer points out, *γλῶσσα* is also used figuratively in a personified way as a synonym for *φυλή*, *λαός*, and *ἔθνος* (See Rev 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; and 17:5). Thus it serves to distinguish one *ἔθνος* or *λαός* from another.<sup>3</sup>

3. In a third sense *γλῶσσα* is used as a technical term for speech that is obscure. Bauer suggests that a special problem is posed by the use of the word in 1 Corinthians 12–14 and in Acts 10:46 and 19:6. He defines it as “the broken speech of persons in religious ecstasy,” (see Arndt-Gingrich). Behm in Kittel is more cautious. He says, “an expression which in speech or manner is strange and obscure and needs explanation.”

In his discussion of the use of *γλῶσσα* in the New Testament and its background, Behm calls it “a peculiar phenomenon” and a “spiritually effected speaking.” It is addressed not to men, but to God, in the form of a prayer, possibly of praise and thanksgiving, possibly sung. It has “value” for the individual rather than for the community. “In this inspired utterance the *νοῦς* is swallowed up so that mysterious words, obscure both to the speaker and to the hearers, are spoken in the void.” It gives the impression of being a foreign language, but the uncontrolled use of it would give the impression of madmen. Yet, Behm says, it is a legitimate sign of an overwhelming power. He cites both Hellenistic parallels (e.g., the enthusiastic cult of the Thracian Dionysius) and Judaistic antecedents (e.g., the *מִשְׁכָּל* in Samuel and Kings). He concludes with the observation that “any subsequent phenomena of glossolalia in church history can only be hollow imitations of this first springtime of the Spirit.”

Bauer offers a succinct summary of the two explanations of glossolalia prominent today. Bleek and Heinrici hold that *γλῶσσα* means antiquated, foreign, unintelligible, mysterious utterances, while Reitzenstein and Bousset see in glossolalia a speaking in marvelous heavenly languages. Those who hold to the Reitzenstein-Bousset view apparently base their conviction primarily on 1 Corinthians 13:1: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels...” According to their view the “tongues of men” refers to prophetic proclamation while the “tongues of angels” refers to glossolalia, the language used by the angels in their association with God. In context it would appear to us that “tongues of angels” ought to be read as hyperbole. (Cf. “all

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *What About Tongues Speaking?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp 54f.

<sup>3</sup> Arndt-Gingrich, *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago University Press, 1957), p 161.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Behm, *γλῶσσα* in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, I, 721.

mysteries...all knowledge...all faith...all my goods to feed the poor...my body to be burned.”) To seek to establish a connection between the “tongues of angels” and the tongues spoken of in Corinth makes for interesting speculation but tenuous exegesis.

It might be added here parenthetically that the higher critics complicate matters for themselves with their opinion that Luke either purposely or unknowingly obscured an older tradition that the speaking in tongues on the day of Pentecost was unintelligible, ecstatic utterance. For purposes of his own, however, he reported it as speaking in other languages.

## B. Exegetical considerations

Before we take up a study of the separate glossolalic accounts in Acts and Corinthians, it might be useful to present a list of various explanations of the tongues phenomenon. The list was compiled while reading numerous different books on tongues-speaking. We make no claim that the list is exhaustive, nor do we recall in every case to whom to attribute the ideas.

1. Γλῶσσα is always a foreign language, spoken miraculously. (Lenski, *Bibliotheca Sacra*-Dallas Theological Seminary, D. Burdick, John Rice, R. DeHaan, et al.)
2. Γλῶσσα is sometimes a foreign language (Jerusalem) and sometimes ecstatic speech (Corinth). (Pentecostalists, Kelsey)
3. Γλῶσσα is the language of heaven spoken miraculously on earth as a gift of the Spirit. (Cremer-Koegel)
4. The tongues in Corinth were related to the tongues of Pentecost, but inferior, perhaps in some cases counterfeit. (Stolee)
5. Γλῶσσα simply refers to varieties of expression.
6. Γλῶσσα is a mixture of sounds from many languages.
7. Γλῶσσα is an expression of the “groanings which cannot be uttered” (Ro 8:26).
8. Γλῶσσα was a miracle of hearing. The speaker spoke in his own language, but the hearer heard it in his native tongue.
9. Γλῶσσα was a miracle of memory, a supernatural exaltation of it enabling a speaker to speak parts of languages once heard but never learned. (Smith, *Bible Dictionary*)
10. Γλῶσσα is a language used for speaking to God in worship in contrast to a language employed in speaking to men. (Cf. 1 Cor 14:2)

Some view the phenomenon as speaking a “language” with the tongue as an instrument of the spirit without human consciousness. Laurence Christenson, a prominent Lutheran charismatic, says that the believers in Jerusalem spoke in languages that were understood while believers in Corinth spoke in languages not understood. Believers today are still doing what the believers in Corinth did, according to Christenson. He defines glossolalia as “a supernatural manifestation of the Holy Spirit whereby the believer speaks forth in a language he has never learned, and which he does not understand.”<sup>5</sup> It may sound like gibberish, but it is not. Christenson insists that it is language, not ecstatic utterance that he says is not biblical. Language, according to Christenson, is an expression of meaning in terms of feeling or thought. He cites with approval Paul Tournier, who speaks of glossolalia as appearing to answer the need to express the inexpressible and thus to carry dialogue with God beyond the limits of clearly intelligible language. Thus whether people understand it or not, Christenson says, is irrelevant. It is addressed to God and therefore it has meaning for the speaker. Interpretation of glossolalia is therefore “not the same as translating a foreign language with the mind.”<sup>6</sup> In answer to the question, “Is it really a language?” he offers this summary response: “Speaking in tongues is therefore speaking in a language—a language which expresses the deep feelings and thoughts of the speaker, a language which

<sup>5</sup> Laurence Christenson, *Speaking in Tongues* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1968), p 22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 21.

God hears and understands.”<sup>7</sup> Interpreted, that seems to mean that glossolalia is always speaking in a language—if you accept the glossolalist’s definition of a language.

What do the Scriptures say?

#### *Acts 2, Pentecost*

The tongues spoken miraculously by the disciples on Pentecost day were known languages. We are not aware of any charismatics who question that conclusion. Indeed, Luke’s account does not leave the matter open to question except for higher critics unwilling to accept Luke’s account as reliable.

The Pentecost happening marks the first appearance of tongues in the experience of the New Testament church. That is significant. Since Acts 2 provides us with the first account of tongues-speaking, it also provides us with the most explicit description of the phenomenon. Following the principle that *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, we ought therefore to read the later episodes in Acts in the light of this episode, and we ought to read Corinthians in the light of Acts also, not vice versa. This passage therefore ought to be considered normative for the proper understanding of other passages where the reference to glossolalia is less explicit.

The account says, “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues (ἑτέραις γλώσσαις) as the Spirit gave them utterance” (v. 4). The same word, γλῶσσα, occurs again in verse 11. That “tongue” is to be understood metaphorically as a language and not literally as the organ of the tongue or as something merely ecstatic is obvious from Luke’s use of the word διάλεκτος in verses 6 and 8 as a synonym for γλῶσσα. “Every man heard them speak in his own language, τῆ ἰκίᾳ διαλέκτῳ, (v. 6, same in v. 8). The account also indicates what some of those languages were (vv 8–11), the languages of the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, etc.

Luke’s use of ἕτερος rather than ἄλλος is also instructive. Ordinarily ἕτερος suggests a difference in kind. Thus with γλῶσσα it points to a language different from the languages these men ordinarily spoke.

It is clear then that they spoke languages on Pentecost; the languages were not their native tongues; and they spoke them “as the Spirit gave them utterance,” not as a consequence of having studied them. What they said is also expressly stated, “the wonderful works of God” (v. 11).

#### *Acts 10:44–47, The House of Cornelius*

A vision from the Lord directed Peter to go to the house of Cornelius, a gentile, to present the gospel to him and to the members of his household. As Peter was speaking, “the Holy Ghost fell on them that heard the word” (v. 44). Peter’s companions were astonished by what they saw. They were convinced that this was an authentic outpouring of the Holy Ghost when “they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God” (v. 46). Peter then proposed that Cornelius and his household be baptized since they had received the Holy Spirit in the same manner as he and his fellow disciples had on Pentecost day (“who have received the Holy Spirit ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς,” v. 47. Cf also 11:17, τὴν ἴσην δωρεάν—Peter’s words in describing this incident to the Jerusalem conference.).

Though this account does not specifically say that the γλῶσσαί on this occasion were διάλεκτοι as does the previous account, yet the term Luke employs is the same as in chapter 2, γλῶσσα. Furthermore, Peter twice (10:47 and 11:17) compares the phenomenon at Cornelius’ house with the phenomenon experienced by the disciples on Pentecost day. There simply is no warrant therefore for interpreting γλῶσσα in this passage as something other than a foreign language.

#### *Acts 19:1–7, The Ephesus Disciples*

This account presents the details of Paul’s meeting with twelve disciples of John the Baptist at Ephesus. They were in a transitional period between Judaism and Christianity. They knew about the promised Savior, but they apparently knew nothing of His birth, death, and resurrection. Nor had they heard anything about the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Ghost on Pentecost. Paul then introduced them to Jesus and to the sacrament

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 27.

of Christian baptism. After Paul “had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied” (v. 6).

The passage presents a number of difficult exegetical problems. For example, where does one close the quotation marks for the quote that begins with verse 4? At the end of verse 4 or at the end of verse 5? The answer to that would determine whether these men were rebaptized by Paul or not. But while there are other exegetical difficulties here, there is no exegetical problem with regard to the matter of tongues.

Again, there is no explicit indication here as in Acts 2 that these tongues were dialects or languages, nor does Luke say here as he does in the previous account that these twelve men experienced the same (ἴσθιν, 11:17) thing the Pentecost disciples experienced. Since he does not distinguish between this incident and the other two, and since he uses the same word for tongues, (γλῶσσα), once more, the argument from silence necessitates that we interpret tongues here just as we do in the other two passages. If Luke were making reference to a different phenomenon here, his words would indicate this. It ought to be self-evident that when Luke refers for a third time to an extraordinary occurrence, he expects his readers to read what he says in the light of his two previous references to the same extraordinary occurrence.

All the emphasis on γλῶσσα in our study of these three passages is likely to distort the picture Luke is presenting to us in the book of Acts. The emphasis ought not to be on the tongues, but on the Holy Spirit. Luke makes it clear in addressing Theophilus that his first book (Luke’s Gospel) was intended to be a book about what Jesus *began* to do, while this book (Acts) was intended to be a book about what Jesus continued to do “after that he *through the Holy Ghost* had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen” (1:2). Luke wishes to make it clear to us that Jesus is continuing His ministry in the world “through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> These three episodes in Acts ought to be read in that light.

Thus the important thing for us to see in all three instances is not the ability of individuals to speak supernaturally in tongues, but rather to see the Holy Spirit at work authenticating through miracles the work of the apostles done in Jesus’ name. Those who attach such inordinate importance to tongues-speaking today are not reading Acts the way Luke intends for them to read him. They are like the girl in the fable who was given a rare opportunity to visit the queen, and then missed her opportunity because she was more interested in a cat.

### *1 Corinthians 12–14, Paul’s Corrective for the Abuse of Tongues*

Paul wrote his first Corinthian letter during his third missionary journey, perhaps from Ephesus during his three-year stay there. It predates Luke’s writing of Acts by five or six years. This by no means suggests, however, that one ought to read what Luke says regarding tongues in the light of what Paul had previously written about tongues in Corinth. The story of Pentecost was doubtless well known in the early church before Luke wrote his account of it. We need to remember also that before Acts and First Corinthians were written, Paul and Luke were mission companions—co-laborers in fact. What one knew about Pentecost and tongues the other knew likewise. It would seem probable therefore that when they wrote about tongues, both used the word in the same way with reference to the same kind of phenomenon. For this reason scholars like Lenski<sup>9</sup> and S. Lewis Johnson<sup>10</sup> have insisted that the tongues of Acts and First Corinthians are always intelligible languages. Some things Paul says about the proper use of tongues in Corinth, however, seem to suggest the possibility that the Corinthian phenomenon included ecstatic utterance. We will want to keep this possibility in mind as we survey these chapters.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed consideration of this point, see Frederick Dale Brunet, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p 155ff.

<sup>9</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1946), pp 504f. “...we must ask whether a difference exists between the ‘tongues’ spoken in Jerusalem and Caesarea and those spoken in Corinth. The answer is that they are the same.”

<sup>10</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, “The Gift of Tongues and the Book of Acts” in “A Symposium on the Tongues Movement,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, CXX (Oct.-Dec. 1963), pp 309ff. “...some have contended for a difference between the gift as it occurred in Acts and as it occurred in Corinth. This is manifestly impossible from the standpoint of terminology” (p 310).

Paul's purpose in these chapters is to correct the widespread abuse of spiritual gifts in Corinth. Corinth was plagued with a spirit of rampant individualism. Certain members of the congregation wanted to be soloists and virtuosi rather than members of an ensemble. They used Spirit-given gifts to call attention to their own superior status as members of what Martin Franzmann has dubbed "the Corinthian admiration society."<sup>11</sup> One of the gifts they were abusing was the gift of tongues, an abuse to which Paul directs all of chapter 14.

In the first of these three chapters, Paul reminds Christians that God's Spirit places them under the ruling influence of Jesus as Lord. The gifts the Spirit gives "to every man severally as he will" are to be employed in mutual service for the edifying of all members of the body of Christ. In Christ's body, as in the human body, no member is solitary or self-sufficient. All members depend on each other and are to function together in synchronous fashion.

Paul then proceeds to establish the truth that the greatest gift the Spirit can give is the gift of love. Love is the indispensable gift necessary for a life of service that glorifies the Lord instead of the individual. When love does not temper a Christian's use of God's gifts, the gifts are worthless. Thus without love glossolalia is nothing more than "sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal."

The third chapter provides the corrective for the abuse of spiritual gifts, specifically glossolalia. No Christian is using his gifts properly when he uses them to promote himself or to enhance his own reputation by calling attention to himself as a "good Christian," or when he employs his gifts in a way that creates chaos and dissension in the church and thus hinders the upbuilding of Christ's body. (Note Paul's emphasis on οἰκοδομεῖν throughout the chapter.) Thus Christians are to use the Spirit's gifts so that "all things are done decently and in order."

For obvious reasons we cannot offer a detailed study of these three chapters in this treatise. We can only underscore some of the significant points in Paul's discourse.

### *Chapter 12*

Apparently the Corinthian congregation, or a group within the congregation, had addressed an inquiry to Paul asking his advice about spiritual gifts, and particularly about the problem relating to spiritual gifts in Corinth. Paul gives a negative and then a positive answer. Spirituality is *not* characterized by being "carried away unto...dumb idols" (12:2) in an ecstatic or fanatic fashion. Prior to their conversion from heathenism to Christianity, the Corinthians had regarded such ecstasy as the ultimate religious experience. There seems to be a suggestion here that some wanted to incorporate an element of that ecstatic experience into the worship life of the Corinthian congregation connecting it to speaking in tongues. Paul wants everyone to understand that getting "carried away" is not necessarily "spiritual."

He follows his negative response with a positive one. It is truly a work of the Spirit when a person is led to confess in all simplicity that "Jesus is the Lord" (12:3). Thus Paul sets the stage for all that he has to say about the question of spiritual gifts in general and about tongues in particular. Bruner paraphrases Paul's thought in these opening verses in this way: "When you were non-Christians, the essence of your higher religious experiences was the feeling of being 'carried away' by spiritual forces; now, however, you experience the *Holy Spirit*, and you experience him supremely in your desire to honor Jesus in the intelligible and simple ascription of deity to him."<sup>12</sup>

A discussion of χαρίσματα is next on Paul's agenda. He shifts from the πνευματικά of verse one to the χαρίσματα of verse four. Perhaps πνευματικά was the term employed by the Corinthians in addressing their inquiry to Paul. By shifting to the other term Paul is subtly suggesting to the Corinthians that they learn to subsume spiritual things under things of grace. Or as Bruner puts it, they need to learn "to see the Spirit's ministry not in the glorification of the numinous, exotic, 'spiritual,' or useless, but in the illumination of the historical, concrete, crucified and risen Lord, and here, now, in the continual and varied distribution of free gifts of service in the visible church."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Martin Franzmann, *Concordia Bible with Notes*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), p 311. Note on 1 Cor 12:22-24.

<sup>12</sup> Bruner, *op. cit.*, p 287.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 289.

Paul's list of such grace-gifts is interesting and instructive. It begins and ends with something spoken, λόγος σοφίας and λόγος γνώσεως (v. 8), then γένη γλωσσῶν and ἑρμηνεία γλωσσῶν (v. 10). Paul might just as well have said simply: "wisdom" and "knowledge." But he chose instead to say "the *word* of wisdom" and "the *word* of knowledge." Anyone familiar with the problem in Corinth will not miss the point of Paul's emphasis. "I had rather speak five words with my understanding... than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue" (14:19). The highest, noblest, thing any Christian can do is to honor Jesus, particularly with words that testify to Him. Better to engage in helpful discussion and conversation about spiritual matters than to get carried away with "kinds of tongues" which highlight what one is doing instead of what one is saying.

Thus Paul makes the gift of understandable speech prominent by placing it at the head of his list, and he relegates the gift of tongues to its appropriate place by putting it at the bottom of his list. Let the Corinthians take heed, and glossolalists today also. The fact that Paul places intelligible words first and unintelligible words last, as well as his reason for doing so as suggested by the context, makes one wonder whether Paul was thinking *only* of foreign languages when he placed γένη γλωσσῶν at the bottom of his list.

The problem of the division of the Christian community in Corinth is the subject to which Paul addresses himself next (vv 12–27). God's gifts, Paul insists, are not meant to divide the church. As God-given gifts they meet the needs of the body as a whole and thus serve to unite it. In the human body every member is dependent upon every other member (v. 21)—so too in the church. Each member is dependent upon every other member. No Christian is an island. No gift is unnecessary. Therefore every member of the congregation should be concerned about every other member, and every other member should be concerned about each individual member. They exist for each other's benefit. Their gifts are for mutual benefit. (Note the repetition of "all" and "one.")

Before leaving this point Paul offers a second list (v. 28)—different from the first one, and yet similar in that in both cases Paul places tongues and their interpretation at the end of the list. Anticipating his exhortation to seek earnestly τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα, Paul declares that God has established an order of importance, "*first* apostles, *second* prophets, *third* teachers, *after that* miracles, *then...*" There is to be a clear distinction between the greater and the lesser. Tongues belong without question to the lesser.

### Chapter 13

Some commentators have suggested that this chapter is parenthetical, injected into the middle of Paul's discussion of gifts, and that one could proceed from chapter 12 to chapter 14 without an interruption in the line of thought."<sup>14</sup> We disagree. The chapter is an integral part of Paul's answer to the question concerning spiritual gifts. Paul has just made the point that such gifts are *grace*-gifts, χαρίσματα, from God to God's people undeservedly. God's people in turn display them by means of ἀγάπη love. Love may not be as attention getting as ecstasy, but it is absolutely basic. "Without it," Bruner says, "the Christian graces are dis-graced."

As Paul proceeds with his discourse on love, the Corinthian problem is in the forefront of his mind. What he says is particularly applicable to the question of gifts and their abuse of them, especially tongues. Thus Paul begins his definition of love with the assertion that love is "patient," μακροθυμεῖ. It is characterized by long, drawn out (μακρός) emotion (θυμός) rather than by a spur of the moment emotionalism. We might say by an even-tempered approach to the Christian life rather than by an on-again-off-again enthusiasm with its emotional highs and lows.

Paul's insistence that "charity vaunteth not itself," and that it "is not puffed up," also has its special significance for the tongues-speakers in Corinth. Tongues-speaking can so easily call attention to itself, (περπερεύεται). Love does not do that. The contempt and the disregard of others by the members of "the Corinthian admiration society" suggest that they had an inflated sense of their own spiritual status because of their experiences. Paul calls it being "puffed up," φουσιόται. Love does not do that either. Paul adds that "love seeketh not her own." Love understands the nature of the διακονία as Paul describes it in the previous chapter (12:5). His description also looks ahead to the next chapter. The one who speaks in tongues edifies himself

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Donald W. Burdick, *Tongues—To Speak or Not to Speak* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p 51.

(14:4)—something which can easily become a seeking τὰ ἑαυτοῦ—while the one who prophesies (proclaims that Jesus is the Lord) edifies the church.

This chapter also presents an exegetical problem of special significance. Paul states that tongues will cease, παύσονται, and that prophecy and knowledge will vanish away, καταργηθήσεται. Many have contended that this verse should settle the tongues question once and for all. It declares that tongues were to cease, and history reveals that in the post-apostolic age they did indeed cease after the canon of Scripture had been established. These interpreters also insist that γλῶσσα can only mean an intelligible language. Therefore since tongues were to cease, and since the only legitimate speaking in tongues involved languages, all ecstatic tongues-speaking today is illegitimate on both counts.<sup>15</sup>

These interpreters are not dismayed by the fact that Paul couples the cessation of tongues with the vanishing away of prophecy and knowledge. Obviously knowledge has not vanished away yet, nor has prophecy, broadly understood in the sense of proclamation or testimony. Their solution lies in Paul's change of verbs. Prophecy will be rendered useless, καταργηθήσεται; tongues will cease, παύσονται, and knowledge will be rendered useless "when that which is perfect is come" (v. 10), and when finally "we see (God) face to face" (v. 12). But in the meantime, before the Lord's return, tongues will simply cease.<sup>16</sup>

That makes for an interesting bit of exegesis consistent with the reading of the tongues episodes in Acts by these interpreters. It also simplifies the solution to the tongues problem today for those who accept that exegesis. To us however it seems to press something from the text that Paul does not explicitly say. That tongues will cease—yes, definitely. That tongues will cease prior to the rendering useless of prophecy and knowledge—no, not positively. In context Paul's purpose is merely to establish the supremacy of love over all else (cf. verses 8 and 13 particularly). We must be cautious not to make Paul say more than he intended to say. Moreover, an assessment of the tongues movement today is possible without recourse to this particular passage.

#### Chapter 14

The first of the three chapters concluded with a promise to show the Corinthians "a more excellent way." Love's way is that more excellent way. Love has a goal. Its one and only interest is the building up of the church. That is the theme of this chapter, the οἰκοδομή of the church. A gift is a gift of the Spirit and is properly used if it serves to edify the church. The overriding consideration in the church therefore must always be: What serves best to edify, to build up, the church?

Paul narrows that question down in this chapter to a consideration of prophecy and tongues. In doing so he spells out glossolalia's limitations for good and its potential for harm.

The Apostle urges the Corinthians to "follow after charity" and to "desire spiritual gifts," but especially that they, "may prophesy." He devotes a major portion of this chapter to a demonstration of the superiority of prophecy over tongues. Prophecy edifies the church, tongues merely the individual (v. 4). And to insure that tongues do not continue to cause dissension and division in the congregation, Paul sets down explicit strictures governing the use of tongues in the church. He does not forbid speaking in tongues lest he limit the Spirit, but he does seek to make certain that the gift is used in keeping with its limited potential and purpose.

Here are his directives:

1. Prophecy is to be preferred over tongues because the one is comprehensible to people and edifies them while the other is not (vv 1–3).

<sup>15</sup> For a more complete presentation of this point, cf. "First Corinthians and the Tongues Question," Stanley D. Toussaint in *Bibliotheca Sacra*'s "A Symposium on the Tongues Movement," CXX (Oct. 1963), 311 ff.

<sup>16</sup> Some interpreters regard the time "when that which is perfect is come" as referring to the time of the establishment of the canon of Scripture. The Scriptures are τὸ τέλειον. Merrill Unger in *New Testament Teaching on Tongues* argues convincingly for this point of view. However, Paul's coupling of knowledge together with tongues and prophecy argues against this view. Knowledge was not rendered useless when the canon was established. It appears to us that verse 10 must be understood in the light of verse 12 where the reference is clearly to the parousia.



2. Tongues speaking is not to be employed publicly without an interpreter.<sup>17</sup> Tongues speakers ought therefore to pray for the gift of interpretation (vv 5,13).
3. Good order is to be preserved when tongues are spoken in an assembly of Christians. This means that not more than three are to speak, one at a time, and only if an interpreter is present (v. 27).
4. Women are not to be extended the privilege either of speaking in tongues or prophesying in a public assembly. They are to “keep silence in the churches” (v. 34)—a prescription often arbitrarily set aside by charismatics today.
5. Finally, Paul prohibits the prohibition of tongues (v. 39). Considering all the trouble that had resulted from the abuse of tongues, one could understand if Paul had issued an outright order to cease and desist. But he is not about to impinge on the Holy Spirit. He seeks to solve the problem by controlling it, not by excluding it.

Once again we must pose the question of what is meant in this chapter by tongues. As we have noted previously, some say only *xenoglossia* (foreign languages) are meant. Other scholars say these tongues are ecstatic utterances, perhaps heavenly languages not spoken on earth. Still others hold that both are possible.

Paul does not qualify these tongues as being “unknown tongues” as does the KJV. It is entirely possible, as Lenski insists, that these tongues are languages used by the people of different nations. We agree with those who assert that there is nothing in this chapter that requires that the tongues be understood as ecstatic utterances. Some insist that verse two contains an apparent reference to ecstatic speech. Not necessarily. Paul says, “He that speaketh γλώσση (in a tongue) speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries.” The tongue in this case could be a foreign language not understood by the hearer. God understands what he is saying, but his hearers do not.

A similar point is made with regard to verse four. Since the tongues-speaker “edifieth himself” and not the church, his tongue must be ecstatic. Possibly, but not positively. It could be that no one is edified by what he is saying because the language he is speaking is as foreign to his hearers as Chinese is to most people reading this article. The speaker himself may not understand what he is saying (as the necessity of an interpreter suggests) and yet edify himself by what he is saying. He is edified not by the content of his words, but by the fact that God is using him in a miraculous fashion to make known the wonderful works of God. Verses ten and eleven seem to confirm this.

A verse frequently cited as evidence that γλῶσσα means a foreign language is verse 21. Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11–12: “With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people...” In context Isaiah is warning Israel that because of her apostasy, God will punish His people at the hands of the Assyrians. God intended to use their language spoken with their own lips to teach His people a lesson. Thus it is contended that just as the tongue God used as a sign in Isaiah’s day was a foreign language, so also the tongues that God used as a sign in the apostles’ day were similarly foreign languages.<sup>18</sup>

The weight of evidence seems to favor those who interpret γλῶσσα as an intelligible foreign language. We personally feel their conclusion is the correct one. It is a reasonable conclusion reached on the basis of sound principles of interpretation. There appears to be no compelling reason to regard the tongues of Corinthians as being different from the tongues of Acts. While we are not sympathetic toward those who

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<sup>17</sup> The question of whether tongues are languages and/or ecstatic utterance also raises a second question. What is an interpreter? If languages are meant, then the interpreter is a translator. But if ecstatic speech is involved, then the interpreter becomes one who offers an explanation of the phenomenon. In Pentecostal circles, that essentially is what an interpreter does

<sup>18</sup> For a somewhat novel interpretation of verses 21-25, cf. Zane Hodges, “The Purpose of Tongues” in *Bibliotheca Sacra*’s “Symposium” CXX (July 1963), p 226. Hodges sees Isaiah’s prophecy as referring also to the tongues spoken as a sign to the Jews on Pentecost day.

include ecstatic utterance in their understanding of tongues in Corinth, we acknowledge the possibility of it.<sup>19</sup> Exegetically the question must be left open.

Leaving the question open however does not leave us without a basis for judging the tongues phenomenon today. Certainly it would be simpler if the legitimacy of tongues could be determined on the basis of whether the tongues-speaker is speaking a foreign language or not (especially in view of William Samarin's conclusion that "no glossa, no matter how well constructed, is a specimen of human language"<sup>20</sup>).

Our basis for judging righteous judgment is the whole counsel of God. Thus if a person comes to me and claims to have the gift of tongues, the important thing for me is not to hear a demonstration so that I can determine whether or not it is of the Spirit. I want to know how that person understands and confesses the gospel. If anyone comes to me, and does not bring "this doctrine," then I am not to receive him into my house nor bid him God speed (2 Jn 10). In such a case there is no need to determine whether his ecstatic speech is of the Spirit or not. His doctrine certainly is not.

On the other hand, if someone comes to me (as in one case with which I am familiar) and claims to have the gift of tongues, and confesses with me the whole doctrine of the gospel, then I am going to extend the right hand of fellowship to that person. As for the tongues, I still may not be certain whether it is a thing of the Spirit or not. I am not certain that it is, but neither can I be certain that it is not. I will simply withhold my judgment. Meanwhile I will counsel that person with regard to the restrictions St. Paul imposes upon the use of this gift in the church. He will use it privately, not publicly without an interpreter. And if it is ecstatic rather than a legitimate language, there will be no interpreter available. He will not encourage others to seek the gift because Christians are to desire prophecy rather than tongues, and because in all authenticated cases it was not given to individuals seeking it or even expecting it. I will also warn him about the abuse of the gift as in the case of the Corinthians lest he become "puffed up" as did many of them.

If Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 14 is followed, there will be no problem. If it is ignored as is so frequently the case with Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals today, then there will be a repeat of the problem in Corinth. And the evidence indicates that problem is a serious one again.

### C. The Purpose of Tongues

Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals are generally agreed that the gift of tongues is an evidence of the "baptism with the Holy Spirit." It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into Spirit-baptism as it is understood by tongues-speakers. Suffice it to say that charismatics believe that a second reception of the Holy Ghost is necessary to empower a believer to fully live the Christian life. The primary evidence that such a baptism has occurred is the ability to speak in tongues. That is the purpose of tongues for the Pentecostal. Support for this view is drawn chiefly from the Acts passages.

Others believe that the primary purpose of the gift of tongues was to facilitate the spread of the gospel, especially at the dawn of the New Testament age. The gift eliminated the language barrier, enabling men to spread the good news farther faster. That is doubtless a reasonable conclusion, though Scripture nowhere

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<sup>19</sup> A point that seems to argue in favor of ecstatic utterance is the fact that the interpretation of tongues is a gift. If all tongues are languages, then why is interpretation a gift? If Swahili is my mother tongue, it requires no special gift on my part to tell you what a tongues-speaker is saying in Swahili.

Frank Stagg offers this comment on the unintelligibility of tongues in *Glossolalia* (Abingdon Press, 1967), p 38: Tongues were "not like Aramaic, Greek, or Latin. They were motor phenomena brought on under the excitement of religious experience. They could result from a genuine encounter with God. On the other hand 'tongues' could be an effect highly desired, expected, sought, and displayed for one's own enhancement. The utterance was unintelligible. It was like the blowing of a trumpet in so garbled a way that soldiers would not know whether to arm for battle or go to bed (14:8). It was like listening to a 'barbarian' whose speech conveyed no meaning (14:11). It left the understanding (νοῦς) unfruitful (14:4). 'Tongues' belong to the mind (φρήν) of a baby, not of a mature person (14:20). As an emotional, motor reaction, one could engage in 'tongues' without use of his mind (14:19)."

<sup>20</sup> Wm. J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and of Angels* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p 128. Samarin further states that "contrary to common belief, it has never been scientifically demonstrated that xenoglossia (tongues speaking in foreign languages) occurs among Pentecostals: people just do not talk languages they are unfamiliar with" (p 227).

indicates that this was God's purpose in granting the gift. If it was one of His purposes, apparently it was not the primary purpose.

Some who espouse that conclusion cite Acts 2 to support their view. They point out the disciples could be understood by everyone in that vast audience on Pentecost day. While it is true that there were people present from many corners of the earth, it is also true that all of them understood Aramaic or Greek or both. Had Peter preached in either of those languages (which in all probability he did) everyone would have understood him. The episodes involving the Samaritans (ch. 8), Cornelius (ch. 10) and the Ephesus disciples (ch. 19) offer even less credence to this view of the purpose of tongues.

On the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:14–17 and 28 some neo-Pentecostals believe that God gives the gift of tongues for a devotional purpose. Paul speaks in verse 14 about praying “in a tongue.” Such praying involves the *πνεῦμα* but not the *νοῦς*. Paul approves such prayer in private. In verse 16, to “bless with the spirit” is also a form of prayer, specifically of thanksgiving. Also in verse 28 tongues-speaking is identified as a speaking “to God.” Charismatics seek to connect these Corinthian verses to Romans 8:26, “the groanings which cannot be uttered,” (ecstatic speech?) and to Ephesians 5:18–20 where Paul speaks of being “filled with the Spirit” and then “singing and making melody *in your heart* to the Lord.” In Romans however it is not the person praying, but the Spirit as Intercessor who produces “the groanings which cannot be uttered.” And if they cannot be uttered, there can be no speaking of them in tongues or otherwise. In Ephesians, Paul's thought is that our singing and making melody are to be heartfelt.

We can understand why charismatics try to establish that glossolalia is a special language given for the purpose of worship. But the Scriptures do not give us that impression, especially the Acts passages.

Paul says that “tongues are for a sign” (εἰς σημεῖον, v. 22) “not to them that believe, but to them that believe not.” In other words, tongues offer an evidence or sign of something objective, not something subjective. God filled individuals with the Spirit and gave them the gift of tongues not so much as a sign to the individual who did the speaking, but rather for those who heard the speaking. In all three instances in Acts, that makes sense.

On Pentecost day the miracle of tongues served the purpose of confirming to 3000 unbelieving Jews the claims of Peter's gospel message. In Cornelius' house the situation was reversed. The converts spoke in tongues and the converters were given a sign—a sign to Peter and his astonished companions that the gospel was intended for gentiles as well as for Jews (10:45). It also served as a sign to Peter that Cornelius and his family were proper candidates for baptism (10:47). Later at the Jerusalem conference, Peter's mention of the gift of tongues was the irrefutable evidence that silenced the opposition in the circumcision party (11:15–18). And in Ephesus, where John's disciples spoke in tongues after their baptism by Paul, the tongues were a sign confirming the testimony of Paul to them concerning the person and work of the Holy Ghost.

Thus glossolalia was a gift given by God, not primarily as a special language for worship; not primarily to facilitate the spread of the gospel; and certainly not as a sign that a believer has experienced a second “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” It was given primarily for an evidential purpose to authenticate and substantiate some facet of God's truth. This purpose is always distorted by those who shift the emphasis from objective sign to subjective experience.

## II. Historically Considered

### 100–1900 A.D.

The history of glossolalia is instructive—more because of its exiguousness than its copiousness. There is more to the history of glossolalia in the last 50 years than in the preceding 1900 years. Our purpose in this study is to review that history briefly from the time of the apostles to the beginning of the present century, and to attempt to draw some pertinent conclusions from it. A review of the history of glossolalia in this present century

is beyond the scope of this study.<sup>21</sup> Because much of it is recent history, we can assume a degree of familiarity with it sufficient for some concluding observations.

In the post-apostolic age, the pre-Reformation centuries, and the post-Reformation era, the most notable thing about glossolalia is the infrequency of its occurrence as well as the scant attention paid to it by the chroniclers of the theology and history of the church. Moreover when mention is made of tongues, it is almost always in circumstances less than favorable to it, or by individuals whose theology is suspect or whose orthodoxy is questioned (e.g., Montanus, Tertullian). Both in earlier as well as in later history, the phenomenon manifested itself particularly among groups of persecuted Christians—something noteworthy because of the psychological predisposition favorable toward the ecstatic often associated with such persecuted groups. Noteworthy too is the fact that the minority groups among whom it did reportedly occur were not in the mainstream of the flow of church history. Nor should it be forgotten that glossolalia as an ecstatic experience is by no means a phenomenon peculiar to those professing the Christian faith. Indeed, it has occurred with greater frequency among mystics of heathen religions than it has within the church.

All of this suggests a pertinent question. As we recall the various references to glossolalia in these nineteen centuries of the church's history, do they suggest a phenomenon identical to the miraculous gift of tongues in Acts? Or do the circumstances suggest something counterfeit?

Montanism reportedly provides the first post-apostolic reference to ecstatic glossolalia. Montanus, like Papias, Justin, Irenaeus, and a host of others, firmly believed in the early return of Christ. Montanus developed the characteristic chiliastic notions of these fathers into a full-blown heretical sect late in the second century. Together with two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, he prophesied the establishment of the millennial kingdom at Pepuza in Phrygia. He claimed to be the instrument of the Paraclete promised by Jesus in John 14:16, and a mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit. He predicted a new "pentecostal baptism" in the church. Rigorous legalism characterized Montanist theology (just as it does Pentecostal theology today) including fasts, abstinence from the Satanic snares of worldly entertainment, avoidance of jewelry and cosmetics by women. It promoted a monastic life-style for the Christian. Not the least of the errors of the Montanist heresy was the claim that Christians who lapsed into a mortal sin could not be restored to fellowship in the church. The Montanist movement spread from Phrygia to the West and to North Africa where Tertullian espoused and promoted it.

Significant for our study is the fact that according to Eusebius, Montanus "was carried away in spirit, and wrought up into a certain kind of frenzy and irregular ecstasy, raving, and speaking, and uttering strange things."<sup>22</sup> According to Eusebius, Prisca and Maximilla also spoke "in a kind of ecstatic frenzy." Such activity is hardly reminiscent of the experience of the apostles on Pentecost day.

There is a question as to whether the "uttering of strange things" by the Montanists was prophetic or glossolalic. That they indulged in wild prophecies is certain. That they practiced glossolalia is not certain. Montanists were attacked for their prophecies but not for speaking in tongues. Regardless of how one understands Eusebius, the student of Montanist history can conclude for himself whether or not Montanism was "of the Spirit," and whether it is something that recommends itself for Christian emulation.

Pentecostals frequently enlist Irenaeus (130–200) in support of their view that the ability to speak "in all kinds of languages" was still commonplace in the church in the second century. In *Against Heresies* Irenaeus wrote:

For this reason the apostle declares, "We speak wisdom among them that are perfect," terming those persons "perfect" who have received the Spirit of God, and who through the Spirit of God do speak in all languages, as he used Himself also to speak. In like manner we do also hear many brethren in the Church, who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds

<sup>21</sup> For a brief sketch and analysis of the history of glossolalia from the beginning of Pentecostalism to the present, cf. the author's essay for the Northern Wisconsin District Convention, August 1972, "The Holy Spirit and the Charismatic Renewal."

<sup>22</sup> Cited by Anthony Hoekema, *What About Tongues Speaking?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p 11. The reference is to the *Ecclesiastical History* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1970), Book V, ch. 16, p 184.

of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God, whom also the apostle terms “spiritual,” they being spiritual because they partake of the Spirit, and not because their flesh has been stripped off and taken away, and because they have become purely spiritual.<sup>23</sup>

After quoting this passage Hoekema<sup>22</sup> raises several objections to the legitimacy of the Pentecostals’ citation of Irenaeus in support of their conclusions. He notes that in an earlier list of the gifts of the Spirit still extant in the church in his day, Irenaeus did not include speaking with tongues. He also notes that in context Irenaeus’ purpose is to explain Paul’s use of the terms “perfect” and “spiritual,” and that it is not entirely clear from the quotation whether Irenaeus is speaking about Christians in Paul’s day or about Christians in his own day.

We think Hoekema’s interpretations of Irenaeus are interesting but unnecessary. We are quite willing to grant that contemporaries of Irenaeus spoke legitimate tongues, and that God enabled them to do so for the same authenticating purpose for which He enabled others to do so in the first century. We are also quite willing to concede that the phenomenon may have continued until the establishment of the canon, and perhaps even beyond. But the question remains, is anyone doing it today? (cf. footnote 20).

Tertullian was a contemporary of Irenaeus. In his writing *Against Marcion* there is a passage that suggests that ecstatic speech was a common practice among his people. Tertullian’s purpose is to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Marcion’s Gnosticism. The gospel is validated by the supernatural; gnostic philosophy is not. Tertullian writes:

Let Marcion then exhibit, as gifts of his god, some prophets, such as have not spoken by human sense, but with the Spirit of God, such as have both predicted things to come, and have made manifest the secrets of the heart; let him produce a psalm, a vision, a prayer—only let it be by the Spirit, in an ecstasy, that is, in a rapture, whenever an interpretation of tongues has occurred to him; let him show to me also, that any woman of boastful tongue in his community has ever prophesied from amongst those specially holy sisters of his. Now all these signs (of spiritual gifts) are forthcoming from my side without any difficulty, and they agree, too, with the rules, and the dispensations, and the instructions of the Creator.<sup>24</sup>

The reference to ecstasy and rapture involving “an interpretation of tongues” is somewhat vague. Granting that Tertullian engaged in ecstatic speech, however, does not recommend it to any true Christian today since Tertullian wrote his polemic against Marcion as a member of the heretical Montanist sect. It may well confirm the practice of ecstatic speech in Tertullian’s day, but it does not establish the continuance of the Pentecost miracle or even of the legitimate ecstatic utterance of Corinth (if that is what it was) in Tertullian’s day.

The passing of Tertullian marks the beginning of a millennium of glossolalic silence. Two of the fourth century’s most notable church fathers representing East and West, Chrysostom and Augustine, testify clearly to the fact that tongues had ceased in the church.

Chrysostom was without question the most eloquent and effective expositor of the Scriptures in his age. He was a prolific writer. He wrote and preached in Greek sixteen centuries closer in time to the *Koine* of the New Testament than we are today. He ought to have had a feel for the language difficult if not impossible for us today. In Homily XXV expounding First Corinthians 14 Chrysostom leaves no doubt that he understands γλῶσσαι to mean a foreign language. Commenting on verses 13–15 he writes:

<sup>23</sup> *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), I, 531 – Book V, Ch. VI, 1. The Greek text has παντοδαπαῖς γλώσσαις for all kinds of languages. The point under discussion in Chapter VI is “the perfect man” which “consists in the comingling and the union of the soul receiving the Spirit of the Father, and the admixture of that fleshly nature which was moulded after the image of God.”

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 446-447. Book V, Ch. 8.

For if a man should speak only in the Persian, or any other foreign tongue, and not understand what he saith, then of course to himself also will he thenceforth be a barbarian, not to another only, from not knowing the meaning of the sound. For there were of old many who also had a gift of prayer, together with a tongue; and they prayed, and the tongue spake, praying either in the Persian or the Latin language, but their understanding knew not what was spoken. Wherefore also he said, “If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prayeth,” i.e., the gift which is given me and which moves my tongue, “but my understanding is unfruitful.”<sup>25</sup>

In an interesting footnote to this section called to my attention recently by one of our pastors, editor Talbot Chambers adds, “From this phrase—a similar one occurs in the next homily—it seems that Chrysostom held the tongue to mean the power of speaking in a language not before acquired. Most modern expositors understand by it an ecstatic utterance, a view which Tertullian alone of the patristic writers held.”

Chrysostom begins his commentary on the tongues chapters of Corinthians with this revealing observation:

This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity hath produced us again another question: namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more? This however let us defer to another time, but for the present let us state what things were occurring then.<sup>26</sup>

Augustine shared the conviction of Chrysostom regarding tongues. In a commentary on First John, he specifically says that the time of tongues speaking had passed. He suggests that the miracle of tongues was a “betokening” intended to show that the gospel was to be proclaimed “over the whole earth.” Then he adds, “That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away.” As evidence he adds, “In the laying on of hands now, that persons may receive the Holy Ghost, do we look that they should speak in tongues?” He concludes his argument with the observation that it is wrong to conclude from an inability to speak in tongues that the Holy Spirit was not given through the laying on of hands.<sup>27</sup> He makes a similar assertion in his essay “On Baptism, Against the Donatists.”

Morton Kelsey, a non-tongues speaking Episcopalian, has written a popular work<sup>28</sup> sympathetic toward neo-Pentecostalism. He offers a novel explanation of the early church’s silence on the subject of glossolalia. He suggests that in the first centuries the practice was commonplace in private, but nothing was said publicly because the Christians were concerned about their image. They did not wish to give non-Christians the impression that their faith was irrational. This suggestion is consistent with Kelsey’s tendency to make a case for tongues by what he reads into the fathers rather than out of them.

Kelsey also notes that there is no mention of glossolalia in the polemical writings against the Montanists. As an explanation he suggests that Montanists’ alleged tongues-speaking was acceptable to other Christians because it was common also among orthodox Christians. So why take issue with it? More likely is it that the grosser errors of Montanism were of greater concern to polemicists, such as their prophetic pronouncements.

<sup>25</sup> *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), XII, 211.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p 168. Chrysostom’s Homilies on First Corinthians 12-14 cover 55 double column pages in the NPNF. A cursory reading of Chrysostom’s commentary nowhere suggests a familiarity on his part with the phenomenon of ecstatic *γλωσσαι*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 497. Homily VI, par. 10. Augustine is expounding First John 3:25, “In this we know that He abideth in us, by the Spirit which He hath given us.”

<sup>28</sup> Morton Kelsey, *Tongues Speaking* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), pp 32ff.

From Augustine through the Reformation era to the beginning of the present century, reports of glossolalic experiences have been surprisingly infrequent, partly perhaps because until the 17th century Rome regarded ecstatic experiences as an evidence of demon possession. In some cases the reports are unreliable, in other cases the circumstances are peculiar.

In the 11th century such a report involved St. Hildegard, an unlettered woman supposedly capable of interpreting the Latin Scriptures and able to speak an entirely unknown language. She received her gift after a moving religious experience and after a series of visions from God.

Thomas Aquinas, systematizer of Rome's theology, espoused the position of Augustine asserting that glossolalia occurred when God offered it, and that now it no longer happens.

In the 14th century it was St. Vincent Ferrer whose gift of tongues, it was said, was identical to that of Acts 2. In the following century tongues were attributed to St. Louis Bertrand, missionary among the Indians of South America. St. Francis Xavier, the 16th century missionary, was credited with the gift when the church canonized him. His advocates reported that he was capable of preaching to the natives of China, Japan, and India in their own tongues without having learned the languages. However, their testimony, so typical of the exaggerations associated with the process of the canonization of the saints, contradicted the testimony of Xavier himself.

It is singularly remarkable that there are no reports of glossolalic experience associated with the Protestant Reformation, not even among the Enthusiasts who displayed many of the other characteristics of contemporary charismatics. Thomas Muenzer and his Zwickau sympathizers were guilty of numerous other aberrations regarding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and His gifts, but they laid no claim to the gift of tongues. Considering the times, the renewed interest in and emphasis upon the Word, the intensified study of the Word by the reformers to rediscover the whole truth, and the rededication on the part of Christians to the goal of the Spirit-filled life—yet not a single recorded instance of tongues-speaking in an age marked by as abundant an outpouring of the Holy Spirit as at any other time in history! In view of the record of history, how can any serious student of the Scriptures and of the history of the church contend that God intended the gift of tongues to be a permanent gift for His people?

Morton Kelsey makes a half-hearted attempt to line up Luther on the side of the glossolalists. He quotes Souer's *History of the Christian Church*, in which the author contends, "Dr. Martin Luther was a prophet, evangelist, speaker in tongues and interpreter in one person, endowed with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit."<sup>29</sup> Kelsey acknowledges that there is some doubt about the author's conception of tongues. But then quite incredibly Kelsey adds, "I would suggest that this is quite a plausible story. It relates closely to the other psychic experiences which broke in on Luther at intervals during the two years before he took final monastic vows, and which undoubtedly had much to do with the historical role of protest he later played out to the full." While we do not agree that Luther might have been a candidate for tongues-speaking because he was a psychic, we do appreciate Kelsey's acknowledgement that some tongues-speakers have psychic tendencies.

In the four hundred years following the Reformation there have been several noteworthy instances of tongues-speaking, one of them perhaps a precursor of 20th century Pentecostalism. The first instance occurred among the Cevennols of Southern France. The Cevennols were Huguenots who were mercilessly persecuted following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. While thousands of French Protestants fled the country, the Protestant peasants of Cevennes stayed and endured the persecution. Many of them claimed the gift of prophecy for themselves as well as the gift of tongues enabling them to speak words inspired by the Holy Spirit. Ecstatic behavior was commonplace among them together with other eccentricities. Some claimed that lights in the sky guided them like the star of Bethlehem. Others prophesied the resurrection of one of the notable members of their community who had died. Like the Montanists they predicted the Lord's early return. These Cevennols earned their page in history, but not because of their orthodox theology or because of their witness to the gospel.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p 51. An attempt was made to determine who Souer is. The Seminary library however does not contain his *History of the Christian Church*. Nor is his name listed in any of the library's indices of authors or biographical dictionaries.

The Jansenists of France experienced something similar. As disciples of Cornelius Jansen, bishop of Ypres, these 18th century protestors sought to reform the Roman church through a restoration of the teachings of Augustine. The Jesuits opposed them and succeeded in eliciting papal bulls to condemn them. During the period of persecution and suppression that followed, some Jansenists began to speak in tongues. Those who did so, however, were regarded as extremists and fanatics. Reputable Jansenists disassociated themselves from the tongues-speakers.

A hundred years prior to the beginning of Pentecostalism in America, the Catholic Apostolic Church, founded in London by Edward Irving, provided a preview of what was to come a century later. Irving, a Presbyterian, had heard of the experience of a Scotch girl, Mary Campbell, who claimed to possess the gift of tongues. She claimed she could speak the language of the natives of the Pewleu islands. Irving sought the gift for himself—by praying for it. Predictably he received the gift, introduced it to his congregation, and shortly bedlam reigned in the church he served. Prophecies followed which were never fulfilled, causing further division between Irving and an associate. The history of this church could hardly serve as a recommendation for glossolalia, but it did set the stage for Agnes Ozman, Charles Parham, and W.J. Seymour a century later.

For the historical record it ought to be added that the first indications of glossolalia in this country appeared in the 19th century among the Mormons and the Shakers. The credibility of Joseph Smith as a witness to the truth requires no comment. Tongues, visions and, new revelations were essential to his system. “Mother” Ann Lee, founder of the Shaker movement, was no less a fanatic than Joseph Smith. She claimed to be able to speak 72 languages. While Smith and Lee may not be typical of the glossolalists of the previous 18th century period of history, their groups are nonetheless representative of the kinds of groups among which this phenomenon appeared.

### **Applying Historical Considerations to Present Practices**

The historical record of glossolalia is instructive. It assists us in adding the dimension of historical perspective to an analysis of neo-Pentecostalism today. Both Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism attach a degree of importance to tongues that assumes a centrality of tongues in apostolic times that is simply not supported by the biblical record. Thousands of people were baptized by the apostles, for whom the “baptism in the Holy Spirit” was not evidenced by speaking in tongues. That pattern continued for 18 centuries, as the record reveals, and still prevails. Charismatics ought not ignore that.

Apologists for glossolalia characteristically point to the apostolic age and to the present, almost ignoring the period in between. They emphasize the point that we are living in the last times and that Scripture predicted “a latter rain” period before Christ’s return in which there would be a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The recurrence of tongues is to them evidence that the latter rain has begun following the long drought. Now God is empowering His people again with the power missing so long in the church.

Only a person who blinds himself to the lessons of history could hold such a view. Church history provides not an ounce of support for the idea that God has impoverished His church for all these years by withholding from His people the power of His Spirit. On the face of it that assumption is quite preposterous.

The Reformation? The gospel proclaimed as a witness to all nations during the mission centuries? Certainly neither age was an era of spiritual impoverishment, yet in neither era did the Holy Spirit give evidence of His empowering activity by causing men to speak in tongues. Jesus promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against His church, and true to His Word, for 18 centuries they didn’t. The power of the Spirit had something to do with that, but tongues were not a part of His program.

If tongues are essential as the initial sign of the full reception of the Holy Spirit, and if tongues are practically a prerequisite for a Spirit-filled life, then how does one explain all those centuries of relative inactivity on the part of the Spirit? If the church could continue and even thrive at previous times in her history without tongues, why are they suddenly so essential now? The answer that we are living in the last days does not satisfactorily answer that question.

The eschatological thrust of the theology of the Pentecostals and neo-Pentecostals in effect divorces the present from the past. At least it operates with an 18-century gap. But that does not jibe with the promises the



Lord gave His church concerning His church, nor with the promises He gave His church concerning the Comforter and His work after the Lord's ascension. In endeavoring to close that gap, Pentecostals ought to give second thought to an identification that relates them to extremist groups that claimed the gift of tongues from time to time in history. If only they were able to identify with an Athanasius, or with a John of the golden mouth Chrysostom, or an Augustine, a Luther, or a Calvin, it would give us cause to pause and consider...but a Montanus, St. Hildegard, St. Claire of Montefalco, or a Dominick of Neisse?<sup>30</sup> That strains a person's credulity. One should no more cite Montanus in support of the gift of tongues than cite the witch at Endor in support of the gift of prophecy.

The historical record also bears out the fact that in many instances those who claimed to possess the gift of tongues were seekers after the gift. In Acts however all those who displayed the gift were non-seeking recipients. The gift came to them unexpectedly. That does not appear to be the pattern as history presents the picture to us, and most definitely is it not the pattern among glossolalists today. If the Holy Spirit is intent upon distributing His gifts "to every man severally as *He* will," it borders on presumption for a Christian to designate the least of the Spirit's gifts as the object of his personal choice, especially when the Lord's specific instruction to us is that we should "covet earnestly the best gifts."

Considered exegetically, no positive case can be made in support of the present day practice of tongues among charismatics. In fact, the weight of scriptural evidence raises serious questions regarding its legitimacy. Considered historically, no case can be made for tongues either. The historical evidence likewise raises questions regarding its legitimacy.

We genuinely appreciate the fact that neo-Pentecostals have succeeded in involving a growing number of people in an earnest reading and study of the Word. We wish and we hope that as they search the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit would redirect their attention away from their own subjective experience of Him to the objective promises He has given them. That would solve the problem of glossolalia.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p 51.