

What We Can Know About Speaking in Tongues

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Every believer craves to be filled with the Spirit of God. We want to know that we are his children, accepted and approved by our Father. We yearn for the fullness of God's power in us. For millions of Christians, speaking in tongues has satisfied those longings. For others it is merely an oddity or even an offense. So what is this experience after all? What does it mean and why do people participate in it? Is it from the Holy Spirit or some other source? The following paper will attempt to answer these questions.

Not every question has a clear-cut answer, so we will not attempt to be clearer or more dogmatic than God has been in the Word. Nevertheless, we can know a good deal about speaking in tongues from a number of angles: historically, biblically, theologically, psychologically, sociologically, and linguistically. In what follows, we will attempt to articulate under each of these six headings what we can know with relative certainty about this extraordinary experience.

I. What We Can Know About Speaking in Tongues *Historically*

Speaking in tongues has played an important role in the church for about 120 years – during the first two decades and during the last ten. During the first twenty years tongues were reported in four different cities: Jerusalem (Acts 2, c. 33 C.E.), Caesarea (Acts 10, c. 42 C.E.), Ephesus (Acts 19, c. 53 C.E.), and Corinth (1 Cor 12-14, c. 55 C.E.). They played a key role in the establishment of the gospel. After the Apostolic age, however, tongues virtually disappeared. Between the 2nd and 18th centuries there is very little talk about tongues, and what does surface is shadowed by controversy. Although the church reported miraculous phenomena down to the fourth century,¹ virtually the only practice of tongues was by the followers of Montanus, who was branded a heretic.² Both Chrysostom³ and Augustine,⁴ the key figures in Eastern and Western Christianity (respectively), considered tongues to be obsolete. Their understanding was that tongues was a foundational gift and thus no longer needed.⁵ This opinion prevailed up through the early 20th century.⁶

¹ Cf. Vern S. Poythress, "Linguistic and Sociological Analyses of Modern Tongues-Speaking: Their Contributions and Limitations," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 42/2 (Spring 1980): 367-88.

² G. W. Dollar, "Church History and the Tongues Movement," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120 (1963) 316-21; C. L. Rogers, "Gift of Tongues in the Post-Apostolic Church (A.D. 100-400)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122 (1965) 134-43.

³ Chrysostom, "Homilies in First Corinthians." Ed. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 168.

⁴ Augustine, "The Homilies on the First Epistle of John." Ed. Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 497.

⁵ It also seems striking that none of the apocryphal books picture the apostles as speaking in tongues. After all, this is the sort of thing they tended to emphasize. Cf. Stuart D. Currie, "Speaking in Tongues: Early Evidence Outside the New Testament Bearing on *γλῶσσαις λαεῖν*," *Interpretation* 19 (1965) 274-94.

⁶ "All the medieval references are so problematic that it is probably best not to try to evaluate them either pro or con." Glenn Hinson, "The Significance of Glossolalia in the History of Christianity," in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research*. Ed. Watson E. Mills. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 186. For a more positive assessment of tongues in the Middle Ages, see J.D. Williams, "The Modern Pentecostal Movement in America: A Brief Sketch of Its History and Thought," *Lexington Theological*

In the last four hundred years there were a few isolated and localized reports of tongues, but nothing earth shattering.⁷ At turn of the 20th century, however, tongues were loosed. It all began on January 1, 1901, during a New Years Eve prayer vigil. Agnes N. Ozman first spoke in tongues at the Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas.⁸ The meeting was held under the auspices of the college president, Charles F. Parham, a former Methodist minister. Before the movement could pick up steam, however, the college closed its doors. But Parham took his Pentecostal message to the streets. His itinerant ministry eventually led him to Houston, Texas in 1905 where he established another college. One of his students was a young African American named William J. Seymour. Seymour exported this message of a new Pentecost to Los Angeles where, on the night of April 6, 1906 he too received the gift of tongues. This generated no little excitement. As the crowds thickened they needed a larger place to meet. It was then that they took over an abandoned Methodist church at 312 Azusa Street. It was here that tongues exploded. From this little church, a global movement sprang.^{9, 10} During those early days, Pentecostalism primarily attracted the poorer classes and the socially disenfranchised. But in the early 60's there was a second wave of neo-Pentecostalism that swept the nation, and indeed the world. People from all levels of society and every major denomination (including Catholicism) experienced the phenomenon of tongues. It was no longer something that mainline theologians and preachers could ignore. The flood of controversy swept Christendom.

II. What We Can Know About Tongues *Theologically*

Basham gives a classic Pentecostal definition: "Speaking in tongues is a form of prayer in which the Christian yields himself to the Holy Spirit and receives from the Spirit a supernatural language with which to praise God."¹¹ This definition assumes two things. First, the primary form of tongues is prayer. Second, tongues constitute a divine, rather than a human language. Basham is right on if we're looking at the dominant contemporary exercise of tongues. However, laid next to the Scriptures, both of these assumptions are suspect. The term "speaking in tongues" in the Bible comes from the Greek phrase *γλῶσσαις λαλεῖν* ("tongues" and "to speak").¹²

Quarterly 9/2 (1974) 50-59. He describes the Albigenses in the 12th century in France; the Mendicant friars in the 13th century, and the Irvingites of the 19th century.

⁷ These would include the Zwickau Prophets during Martin Luther's day, the revivals of Wesley, the Great Awakening of the 1740's, the Presbyterian Irvingites, as well as the frontier revivals of the 1800's in America. It was prominent among the Mormons, Shakers and even the Catholic priests of France named Jansenists.

⁸ Charles Gaede, "Glossolalia at Azusa Street: A Hidden Presupposition," *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989) 77-92.

⁹ Watson E. Mills, *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 4-6.

¹⁰ Pentecostalism was not unique to the American frontiers. A similar phenomenon had been experienced in India some 50 years before the Azusa Street or Topeka revivals. Gary B. McGee, "Latter Rain' Falling in the East: Early-Twentieth-Century Pentecostalism in India and the Debate over Speaking in Tongues," *Church History* 68/3 (1999) 648-665.

¹¹ Don Basham, *A Handbook on the Holy Spirit Baptism* (Pittsburgh: Whitaker House, 1969) 86.

¹² It is from the Greek word (*γλῶσσαις* [glossa, "tongues"] and *λαλεῖν* [lalein, "to speak"]) that we derive the English term "glossolalia". It is simply a technical term for speaking in tongues. Pragmatically, however, it generally denotes incomprehensible speech rather than actual language. The technical term

This is the normal phrase a Greek speaker would use to identify a *foreign language*. In fact, the technical definition we have given it in English – speaking mysterious utterances in a prayer language – would have been foreign to the Greeks. The average person on the street in the days of the Apostle Paul “knew of no technical term for speaking in tongues.”¹³ Furthermore, the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the O.T.) also uses this term for normal human languages (both native language – Job 33:2; Psa 37:30; 39:3; 109:2; Jer 9:5; and foreign languages – Isa 19:18; 28:11; cf. Esther 1:22; Neh 13:24; Jer 5:15).¹⁴ Thus, both the Greeks and the Greek speaking Hebrews used this term for foreign languages. In addition, the actual three examples of tongues in the book of Acts are public proclamations, not private prayers. Therefore, a better definition of Biblical tongues is this: ***The ability to speak in a language which one has never studied (1 Cor 12:28)***. Obviously this definition will require greater elaboration, which it shall receive in the following pages. Just now, however, we need to deal with a number of “lively” discussions glossolalia (i.e. speaking in tongues) has generated in theological circles.

Is glossolalia real human language? We will address this question again from a linguistic perspective in section six of this paper. Here, however, we simply want to synthesize the statements from the Bible, which indicate the linguistic nature of tongues. We have already mentioned in the previous paragraph that *γλώσσαις λαλεῖν* was the normal phrase for foreign languages. And that is exactly what transpired when tongues first broke forth in Acts 2. There were fourteen ethnic/geographic groups identified which heard the Apostles speak in their own dialects.¹⁵

That being the case, why would one assume that tongues are anything but human languages? There are several passages that come into play. First, Paul said one who speaks in a tongue “utters mysteries with his spirit.” Does that not sound like an “unknown tongue”?¹⁶ It may sound that way from a cursory reading, but that was not likely Paul’s intent. They are not mysteries because they are untranslatable but because they are untranslated. In other words, the context does not indicate that they are angelic languages, but untranslated human languages (cf. 1 Cor 14:10). That is why the gift of interpretation was necessary (cf. 1 Cor 12:30; 14:5, 13, 37). It could be possible that this interpretation would actually be of a divine language. However, the context favors a human language, especially in light of Paul’s quotation of Isaiah 28:11 (in 1 Cor 14:21), which clearly indicates a foreign language, not a heavenly tongue. Moreover, one of the theological themes of Pentecost was the reversal of Babel. Thus, to read into tongues an angelic language runs counter to the original purpose of glossolalia to unify, edify and validate God’s people.

used for speaking in an unknown *human* language is *xenolalia*, from the Greek words, “foreign” and “to speak.”

¹³ Roy A. Harrisville, “Speaking in Tongues: A Lexicographical Study,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38/1 (1976) 44.

¹⁴ Engelbrecht builds a strong case based upon the LXX as well as early rabbinic literature, that the phrase “to speak in a tongue” refers to foreign languages, not ecstatic utterances. Cf. Edward A. Engelbrecht, “‘To Speak in a Tongue’: The Old Testament and Early Rabbinic Background of a Pauline Expression,” *Concordia Journal* 22 (1996) 295-302.

¹⁵ The word in Acts 2:6 is actually *dialectos* and is more specific than language in general. It indicates that these peasant Galileans were speaking fluently the local flavor of other languages.

¹⁶ “Unknown tongue” is the wording of the KJV throughout 1 Cor. 14. However, the word “unknown” was supplied by the translators and is not in the original text. It is a bit misleading, in fact, suggesting that these languages were somehow not discernable human languages.

The second key passage is 1 Corinthians 13:1. Here Paul mentions angelic tongues. If Paul spoke in angelic tongues, should we not also expect to? There's the catch -- Paul never claimed to speak in an angelic tongue.¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:1 is both hypothetical and hyperbolic. In other words, Paul is exaggerating to make a point. This hypothetical angelic tongue begins a series of statements contrasting the value of super-miraculous stuff with the superior value of love. The fact is, Paul never "knew all mysteries," "moved mountains," "gave all his possessions to the poor," or "offered his body to be burned." If he did not do anything else in his hypothetical/hyperbolic list, why should we assume he spoke in the language of an angel? Is it possible that he did? Certainly. Is it certain that he did? Hardly. To base the dominant exercise of glossolalia on such a nebulous statement is tenuous.

Finally, there is Romans 8:26: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." Does not that support an ineffable groaning in prayer? Well, yes. However, the groaning is not done by the human agent on earth, but by the very Spirit of God in the throne room. To use this as a support for glossolalia misses the point and diminishes the grandeur of the work of the Spirit on our behalf.

Thus, the theology of glossolalia as unknown languages is built on some faulty exegetical presuppositions. The most natural reading of the tongues texts would lead one to assume a human language:¹⁸ (1) *Glossa* ("tongue") is the normal word used for "a human language" and *hermeneia* ("interpretation") is the normal word for "translation." (2) Acts 2, the first instance of tongues, clearly establishes it as a human language. Unless something changed later on, that should be the initial assumption in subsequent incidents. (3) 1 Corinthians 14:10 strongly suggests human languages, as do the several passages that demand the tongue to be interpreted (cf. 1 Cor 14:13, 37).

So we can assert with relative certainty that tongues in the New Testament were viewed as human languages. That is not to say, however, that the Holy Spirit would not do something in our day differently than he did in ancient times. The Holy Spirit tends to do what he wants, when he wants, where he wants, and how he wants, with or without our permission. Furthermore, reading through the book of Acts demonstrates that the Holy is a master of innovation. He is always up to something new. Thus, it is safe to assume that the Holy Spirit could do something with tongues today different than in the Bible. However, we should also be honest and admit that what is happening today with glossolalia differs from the Biblical description of tongues in a number of significant ways.

Is Glossolalia for the purpose of personal enjoyment? It is common to read testimonies of tongue-speakers who laud the personal benefits of the gift. It is extolled as a wonderful experience that enhances one's devotion to God. These statements stand on 1 Corinthians 14:4, "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church." MacDonald says, "'Glossolalia' is the one gift given primarily for the benefit of the

¹⁷ MacArthur (p. 226) points out that in the Bible, even the angels did not speak in an angelic tongue. "Whenever angels appear in Scripture, they communicate in normal human language (e.g. Lk 1:11-20, 26-37; 2:8-14)."

¹⁸ For a thorough defense of tongues as human languages, see Massyngraerde Ford, "Toward a Theology of 'Speaking in Tongues,'" *Theological Studies* 32 (1971) 3-29; Norman Geisler, *Signs and Wonders*. (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1988) 165-168; Robert Gundry, "'Ecstatic Utterance' (N.E.B.)?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 17/2 (October 1966) 299-307.

individual.”¹⁹ Again, Basham says, “The primary purpose of it is for us in one’s own devotional life.”²⁰ The problem is this: 1 Corinthians 14:4 is not advocating the private use of tongues; rather, Paul is criticizing their use. Turning gifts inward is unhelpful to the body; that is Paul’s point. In fact, in light of 1 Corinthians 14:1a, Paul might even argue that uninterpreted tongues are unloving.

The purpose of all spiritual gifts is to build up the body (1 Cor 12:7ff; 14:1-8). We are not suggesting that ministry is not deeply satisfying. We are arguing that being deeply satisfied through ministering to oneself is misguided. What other gift could be used for one’s own benefit? Would you brag about prophesying to yourself? Or showing generosity to yourself? Or providing leadership to yourself? Paul would surely find this a strange and offensive concept. Indeed, 1 Corinthians 14:28 says, “If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.” This, however, is a far cry from advocating a private prayer language distinct from the public use of tongues. At most, all Paul affirms is that a person in the assembly can speak in tongues privately. But the thrust of Paul’s statement is “Keep it to yourself,” not “Enjoy tongues privately all you want.” Aker points out that such a privatization of tongues would be exceedingly odd against the backdrop of Mediterranean culture:

One really does not speak, then, unless it is understood by others, which is the social dynamic in a Mediterranean society.

For one person to do something which relates only to an individual – such as being personally edified and not being concerned about interpreting the tongues and thus edifying the group – is quite shameful in a kinship oriented society. This social orientation pertained both to Paul and his Corinthian audience.²¹

We conclude therefore, that whatever else might be deemed an appropriate private use of glossolalia, its function in the New Testament was the public good of the body, not the private enjoyment of the individual. If enjoyment is derived from the use of any spiritual gift, it should be that of ministry, not self-gratification.²²

Well, what about a private use of tongues in prayer? Does not 1 Corinthians 4:14-16 justify a private prayer language? Not really. It says,

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?

¹⁹ William Graham MacDonald, “Biblical Glossolalia: Thesis 6,” *Paraclete* 28/1 (1994) 23.

²⁰ Basham 87.

²¹ Benny C. Akers, “The Gift of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:1-5,” 29 *Paraclete* (1995) 19-20.

²² It seems appropriate at this juncture to point out a common fallacy among cessationists. They argue that tongues were for the purpose of evangelism, not personal edification. That is not exactly correct. Tongues were never used as an evangelistic tool. Even in Acts 2 they were used to validate the messenger. The actual evangelism through Peter’s sermon took place in the vernacular.

This text continues Paul's previous argument on tongues. Namely, a person should not use language that does not build up the body. What goes for speaking also goes for prayer and singing (two different types of vocalizations) – use your mind, not just your spirit. The context is about corporate worship, not private devotions.

In fact, there are a couple of possible dangers of spiritual vocalizations that by-pass the mind. First, “those who practice or advocate the use of tongues as a private prayer language should be aware of the possibility that they may be doing something Jesus forbade. He said, ‘But when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words’ (Matt. 6:7).”²³ The value of prayer is not in how it makes you feel but in meaningful communication with a heavenly Father. It should be pointed out here, however, that a key part of that communication is our emotions, and tongues may be a valuable tool in expressing deep feelings to God that words cannot capture. Second, this idea of emptying the mind is foreign to Christian thought. It actually has much more in common with pagan practices such as transcendental meditation, mystical rituals, hypnosis, and other mind-emptying procedures that often open the door to demonic influences. A person who is eager to have a spiritual experience that by-passes the mind may be opening herself up to spiritual entities she wants no part of. This is not to say that all tongue-speaking is demon induced. It is to say that when one looks for a short road to spirituality, bathed in mystical or miraculous experiences, he can become vulnerable to Satanic deception. There are certainly enough testimonies out there to substantiate Satan's twisting of spiritual gifts. This in no way constitutes an accusation against the Charismatic movement.²⁴ It is, however a call for wisdom and caution to those titillated by the mystical or who seek signs to validate God's involvement in their lives (cf. John 4:48).

Are the tongues of 1 Corinthians different than the tongues in Acts? At this point we have some strange bed-fellows. Both secular sociologists and Pentecostal theologians agree that there are significant differences between what happened in *Acts* (at least at Pentecost) and what took place in the Corinthian church. In short, they suggest that *Acts* reports xenolalia (speaking in human languages) and *Corinthians* reports glossolalia (speaking in an ecstatic tongue).²⁵ Likewise, many Pentecostal theologians argue that while *Acts 2* constituted known languages, the *Corinthians* spoke in angelic tongues. On the one hand, secular sociologists come to their conclusion about 1 *Corinthians* because they see similarities between the ecstatic speech there and pagan religions that surrounded them. On the other hand, Pentecostal theologians assert that their own experience matches Paul's description. Both may be skewing the data a bit. For example, are the Corinthian tongues really that similar to Pythia at Delphi, Sibyl, or Dionysus to which they are compared? While there are some similarities, Mills points out the significant differences:²⁶ (1) The Christian is in full control of his/her faculties. (2) Inebriation is antithetical

²³ David Sper, ed. *What About Speaking in Tongues?* July 25, 2001

<<http://www.gospelcom.net/rbc/ds/q0302/point2.html>>

See also Frank W. Beare, “Speaking With Tongues: A Critical Survey of the New Testament Evidence,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964) 229-46.

²⁴ The accusation that tongues is demon induced is actually similar to its psychological explanation since mental illness and demons historically have been connected. This is a poor argument since it comes from etymology and it fails to recognize that one (demons/psychosis) is negative, the other (glossolalia) is neutral. See Hinson 190.

²⁵ Cf. Mills, *Speaking in Tongues 2*.

²⁶ Mills, *Speaking in Tongues 87*

to being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), while pagans used it as a tool to contact the gods. (3) Love for fellows and ethical conduct is essential to Christianity while much of the ecstatic states of paganism were for self-seeking indulgence. Thus one can conclude that while there may have been some formal similarities (particularly if the Corinthians imitated their pagan neighbors or imported some of their own previous practices into the church) yet the basic function of tongues in Corinth did not at all resemble its pagan counterparts. It is, therefore, inappropriate to suggest that tongues in Corinth owes its identity to Greco-Roman religion rather than deriving her Christian roots from Pentecost.

So what of the Pentecostal theologians? Are they correct that Acts and Corinth are different phenomenon?²⁷ There is much to be said in defense of this view:²⁸ (1) In Corinth tongues were only understood when interpreted, yet there is no mention of interpretation in any of the three instances of tongues in Acts. (2) The purpose of tongues in Corinth was edification while in Acts they were clearly for evidential purposes. (3) Every use of tongues in Acts occurs during exceptional circumstances. In Corinth, however, they were part of normal church services. Clearly, there are some significant differences. Nevertheless, there are also some striking similarities, which one would expect since Luke (the author of Acts), was a traveling companion of Paul. (Since he uses the same terminology, it seems Luke is describing the same kind of phenomenon). As has already been explained, both Acts and 1 Corinthians describe *xenolalia*, not *glossolalia* (using their technical definitions). In other words, we are dealing with real language in both books. In addition, Paul says that tongues were a sign to unbelievers (1 Cor 14:22). That is precisely how they were used in Acts. In each instance there were Jews who did not believe what God was doing. Tongues were the evidence that demonstrated the reality of God's working on each occasion. Thus, although tongues were applied differently in the context of the church service in Corinth than in the evangelistic settings of Acts, their basic function and nature seems to be consistent through both books.

Is tongues the evidence that a Christian has the Holy Spirit? This is the standard teaching of the Pentecostal church. It goes something like this: A person comes to faith in Christ and is saved. But sometime after conversion they are baptized in the Holy Spirit and tongues is given as evidence; this is called "the second work of grace." Every Christian should, therefore, eventually manifest this gift.²⁹ This doctrine is based on two Scriptural premises. First, in Acts, the baptism of the Holy Spirit was always evidenced by speaking in tongues (Acts 2, 10, 19, and possibly the Samaritans 8:17-18 as well). The problem with this first premise is that each instance presents conversion in a different way. In Acts 2 the Apostles were certainly saved and later received the ability to speak in tongues. Yet their converts (2:38f) were never asked or expected to manifest the gift even though they were clearly promised the Holy Spirit. In Acts 8, the Samaritans were immersed, yet did not receive the Holy Spirit (or at least miraculous manifestations), until the Apostles laid their hands on them. Both of these instances could, in fact, support the Pentecostal schema (although tongues are not mentioned specifically among the Samaritans). Cornelius' household, however, received the gift of tongues prior to immersion. In

²⁷ Not all Pentecostal theologians agree that Acts and Corinth are different phenomenon. MacDonald, for one, argues vociferously that glossolalia is uniform throughout the N.T. ("Biblical Glossolalia: Thesis 4).

²⁸ Anthony Hoekema, *What About Speaking in Tongues?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966) 82.

²⁹ For a classic articulation of this doctrine see William G. MacDonald, "Glossolalia in the New Testament," *Bulletin of Evangelical Theological Society* 7 (1964) 59-68.

chapter 19, the followers of John the Baptist were immersed into Christ after having been immersed by John. Then, once Paul laid his hands on them they received the gift of tongues and prophecy. Now, try to find a consistent pattern in all that! Oh, there are instances that overlap, but trying to argue for a pattern is ludicrous. The only real consistency is that tongues were evidence of God's approval in the face of unbelieving Jews.

The fact is, tongues do not play a significant role in the lives of converts in Acts. There are twenty-one converts in Acts who are never said to have spoken in tongues (2:41; 3:7-9; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 8:36; 9:42; 11:21; 13:12; 13:43 and 48; 14:1; 14:21; 16:14; 16:34; 17:4; 17:11-12; 17:34; 18:4; 18:8; 28:24). Moreover, "there are nine instances in the Book of Acts where people are described as being filled with or full of the Holy Spirit where no mention is made of tongue-speaking (4:8; 4:31; 6:3; 6:5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9; 13:52)."³⁰ In fact, Acts 2:1-4 is the only time "filled with the Spirit" and tongues is connected. That is because no single gift is for every believer (1 Cor 12:7-11, 29-30).³¹ It is in this very context of gifts that Paul gives the illustration of the human body made up of many parts. While this Pentecostal doctrine does not suggest that the body be one big tongue, it does argue that each member of the body have a tongue attached to it somewhere. (The imagery is bizarre to say the least).

This is where the second scriptural principle comes into play. It is argued that there is a difference between the "gift" of tongues and the "sign" of tongues.³² The gift is for a select few who will exercise it in public. The sign is for every Christian who will experience it in private (a distinction which is nowhere to be found in the bible). In addition, it is argued that 1 Corinthians 12:13 teaches a person will be converted and then at some later point be baptized in the Holy Spirit, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." Hoekema points out two devastating critiques of this theory.³³ First, "all" are brought to unity in 1 Corinthians 12:13. If only *some* have received the "second work of grace" (rather than conversion), Paul's argument is spoiled. Furthermore, this "second work of grace," according to Pentecostal theology is supposed to completely sanctify the individual. Yet Paul identifies the Corinthians as unspiritual babes in Christ (1 Cor 3:1). We therefore conclude that the doctrine of a "second work of grace" is unfounded Scripturally even if it does accurately reflect many individual's personal experience.

What are the benefits of speaking in tongues? There are some who are highly critical of tongues after having experienced it. Some have accused a charismatic leader of coercing them. Others have experienced depression after the gift disappeared. There are even radical confessions of being exorcised from a "demon of tongues." Many denominational leaders have accused tongue-speakers of being divisive (although this certainly cuts both ways) and sensual.³⁴ For the most part, however, tongues have gotten glowing reviews. Mallone, for example, extols glossolalia for personal edification, alleviation of physical pain, empowerment for spiritual

³⁰ Anthony Hoekema, *Holy Spirit Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 44.

³¹ The Greek sentence of 1 Cor. 12:29-30 is constructed in such a way to expect a negative answer. We would say it this way, "Everyone doesn't speak in tongues, do they?"

³² Cf. Kenneth C. Keene, "A Response to 'Biblical Glossolalia – Thesis 7,'" *Paraclete* 29 (1995) 26-28.

³³ Hoekema, "What About Speaking in Tongues." 62.

³⁴ Interestingly, the accusation of sensuality in connection with tongues goes clear back to the days of Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.13.3).

warfare and casting out demons, intercessory prayer and intimacy in worship.³⁵ MacDonald even goes so far as to suggest that in some ways it is the greatest of all the gifts: (1) It is the only gift (along with interpretation), not found in the O.T. (2) It allows a person to commune with God without using rationality. (3) Only that person and God commune without others to interfere. (4) It affords a memento of authentic first-century experience. (5) It revolutionizes the habits of prayer and praise for many Pentecostals. (6) Yielding submission of your tongue is a sign of submission to God. (7) It is conducive to a feeling of unity among Christians.³⁶ These are wonderful things and should not be minimized. Glossolalia is, for millions of Christians, an extraordinary and transformational experience. At the same time it should be pointed out that the Scriptures extol corporate edification, not private gratification. We must guard against the kind of individualistic self-absorption in Christianity that is paraded in Western society. It is counter to the purpose and emphasis of the New Testament.

What We Can Know About Tongues *Exegetically*

Many of the important Scriptural issues bearing on tongues have already been synthesized theologically in the previous section. Yet there remain a number of important passages that are frequently misunderstood. In this section we will address them in their canonical order.

Acts 2:1-4 – Was it the 120 disciples who spoke in tongues or just the 12 Apostles? It is commonly assumed that all 120 believers (Acts 1:15) spoke in tongues on the day of Pentecost. However, virtually all of the textual evidence points to the twelve.³⁷ (1) The baptism of the Holy Spirit was promised specifically to the Apostles (Acts 1:2-5). (2) The word “they” in Acts 2:1-3 refers back to the 12 Apostles, with Matthias newly numbered among them. This would be even more obvious in the original document before chapter and verse divisions were added. (3) All who spoke in tongues were Galileans (2:7). While this is an accurate description of the Twelve (cf. Acts 1:11), it is highly unlikely that this designation could be used of the whole group of 120. (4) Peter stood up with the other eleven (2:14) as he preached his Pentecost sermon. (5) The church was founded on the Apostles (Eph 2:20). It thus makes sense that they would be the ones who received the initial evidential gift of tongues. (6) The twelve could easily have addressed the fourteen national groups in their native dialects because several of the national groups mentioned shared similar languages (particularly Aramaic or Greek). Even if there were more languages than that, there is no reason to suppose that each Apostle could only have spoken one language.

1 Corinthians 12:27-30 – Is tongues the least valuable of the spiritual gifts? In Paul’s list of gifts he places tongues and interpretation last. Because the first few gifts are enumerated, it looks like Paul is placing them (at least roughly) in their order of priority or value. Tongues and interpretation are down at the bottom. Therefore many assume they are the least valuable of the gifts. Several have challenged that. It is argued, for example, that since Paul wished everyone could speak in tongues (1 Cor 14:5), he considered it an extremely valuable gift. It is true that Paul valued tongues and we should thus be wary of demeaning the gift. Yet to take 1 Corinthians

³⁵ George Mallone, *Those Controversial Gifts* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 1983) 92-93.

³⁶ William MacDonald, “The Place of Glossolalia in New-Pentecostalism,” in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia*. Ed. Watson E. Mills (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986), 224f.

³⁷ The following material was adapted from Geisler, *Signs and Wonders*, 173ff.

14:5 as an affirmation of the superiority of tongues is to miss Paul's point. When Paul said he wished everyone spoke in tongues he was expressing his wish, not reality, like when the president of a company says, "I wish you all made a million dollars a year." Do not expect a raise! "Paul did the same thing earlier in this epistle, when he wrote, 'I wish that all men were even as I myself' (1 Cor 7:7). It was his personal desire that all could be celibate because of the spiritual advantages of celibacy. But he knew that God did not give the gift of singleness to everyone."³⁸ Bundrick defends the value of tongues from a different angle. He asserts that they are last on the list, not because they are least, but because they are the topic under discussion. Thus, for rhetorical purposes Paul puts them at the end of the list as a jumping off place for the coming discussion.³⁹ That might work, except that in the very next verse (1 Cor 12:31), Paul says, "But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way." Clearly, there is a hierarchy of gifts. How else could we be urged to seek the greater ones?⁴⁰ Furthermore, tongues are not even mentioned in Paul's other two lists of spiritual gifts (Eph 4:11-12 & Romans 12:6-8, nor Peter's, 1 Peter 4:10-11). If Paul does not even mention it as a gift to the churches of Ephesus and Rome it might be fair to assume it did not hold the same significance as some of the other gifts. The fact is, tongues is only mentioned in three books of the New Testament: Once in the debated ending of Mark (16:17), three times in Acts, and twenty-eight times in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Clearly the dominant material on tongues comes from these three chapters in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and the majority of that is negative. It was a problematic and divisive gift. Paul intentionally put it at the bottom of the list.

1 Corinthians 13:8-10 -- Did tongues already pass away? Paul says their days are numbered: "Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears" (1 Cor 13:8-10). Has this happened already? Or is this prediction yet future? In order to come to a conclusion, we must understand the words Paul uses. First, Paul uses two synonyms to indicate the cessation of tongues, prophecy and knowledge. The words "cease" (*katargeo*, used 3 times in this text) and "stilled" (*pauo*, used only once and in reference to tongues), indicate that an activity will halt. Neither word suggests that the gift will be obliterated, merely that it will not be utilized. The second key word is "perfect." In English this word connotes "flawlessness." Not so in Greek. The word indicates something that is mature or complete. Thus, to paraphrase Paul, *when completion arrives, these incomplete gifts will lay dormant*. Ok, but when will that be? The key is to discover what this "complete" thing is. There are several good exegetical options, actually.

1. The "complete" might be the canon. In other words, when the last New Testament book was written, tongues, prophecy and knowledge would become irrelevant. There are several things that commend this theory. First, all three of these gifts (tongues, prophecy, and

³⁸ David Sper, ed. *What About Speaking in Tongues?* July 25, 2001
<<http://www.gospelcom.net/rbc/ds/q0302/point2.html>>

³⁹ David R. Bundrick, "Equal for Edification: A Response to 'Biblical Glossolalia – Thesis 7' and Its Critics," *Paraclete* 29 (1995) 1-12.

⁴⁰ MacArthur (229), suggests that the phrase "but earnestly desire the greater gifts" should be interpreted as an indicative rather than an imperative. This would render the phrase, "You are earnestly desiring greater gifts." Thus it would be a statement of their misguided behavior rather than a command to seek what they do not have. Grammatically this is possible. Contextually, however, it is unlikely since Paul urges the same thing in three other places (1 Cor 14:1, 5, 12).

knowledge), deal with cognitive information. The completed N.T. filled a great void in this area. Second, the word “mirror” in verse 12 is found only one other time in the N.T. James 1:23 uses it as a metaphor for the scriptures. That would also match this context. Third, this would account for the historical lapse of tongues after the second century.

These are positive contributions to the “canon” theory. However, it is still fraught with difficulty. First of all, it is difficult to imagine that Paul had in mind a concept of canon or that he intended to articulate that to the Corinthian church. Second, the idea that the canon fully satisfies our need for knowledge seems ludicrous. We still need elders, teachers, and pastors, why not prophets, knowledge, or tongues? Third, whoever said that tongues were about delivering information? They simply were not. They were for evidential purposes in evangelism. To assert that the canon can substitute for this function is untenable. Furthermore, tongues, along with interpretation, served to build up the body. That is Paul’s whole argument in 1 Corinthians 14. That need certainly did not die out with the Apostles.^{41, 42} To suggest that tongues could no longer be useful in either evangelism or edification simply because we have the Bible is unreasonable, particularly for those ethnic groups that have yet to hear the word or read it in their own native language. Finally, if one wants to argue that tongues has ceased, (s)he must show that the church has entered into another type of dispensation in which the Spirit no longer speaks to the church in either tongues or prophecy or supernatural knowledge. This would be difficult to do given that both tongues and prophecy seem to be normative in both Acts and 1 Corinthians, in addition to the fact that tongues was predicted in Joel 2 (received in Acts 2) as concomitant with the “last days.”⁴³ We conclude, therefore, that the canon was not likely what Paul had in mind with the “perfect” of 1 Corinthians 13:10.

2. The “complete” might be the second coming of Christ. In other words, when Jesus returns, there will be no more need for tongues or prophecy. We simply need them now as we struggle along through this imperfect world.⁴⁴ This actually fits the context of verses 12 extremely well: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” Moreover, the word “complete” (*teleion*) is a neuter form of the word “end” (*telos*) which is used a number of times

⁴¹ Cf. Rodman Williams, “Biblical Truth and Experience: A Reply to *Charismatic Chaos* by John F. MacArthur, Jr.,” *Paraclete* 27 (1993) 16-30.

⁴² Another fallacious idea of the cessationists argument is that miracles were done only through the Apostles and those upon whom they laid their hands. Thus, miracles died out with the Apostles. First, it is simply not true that only the Apostles and their delegates performed miracles. Ananias healed Paul in Acts 9; there is no mention of his connection to the Apostles, and being from Damascus, it is unlikely. Moreover, there are a number of texts that speak of a broad distribution of gifts among the body (1 Cor 12:10; Gal 3:5; Mark 16:17-18 [although the textual evidence of this passage may be questioned, the sentiment of broad distribution of gifts was clearly assumed in the early church that recorded and adopted this ending of Mark]). Second, 1 Cor 13:8-10 does not suggest that all miraculous manifestations would die out. It only mentions three. To import all the miraculous manifestations into this text is a bit of shoddy eisegesis.

⁴³ William MacDonald, “Glossolalia in the New Testament,” *Bulletin of Evangelical Theological Society* 7 (1964) 59-68.

⁴⁴ The argument that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, is an unfortunate misreading of Hebrews 13:8. This text does not mean that he always works in the same way, especially in different dispensations. We can see from Biblical history that this is not so. Christ’s nature does not change, his program and methods do.

in reference to the end of time. In other words, the word is *close* to a synonym for “the end of time.”

On the other hand, the discussion of eschatology seems a bit out of place here. Why would Paul import a discussion about Jesus’ return here in the middle of a discourse on love? While it is certainly exegetically possible, it seems somewhat uncomfortable. Moreover, if Paul is really saying, “When Jesus comes back we won’t speak in tongues or prophesy anymore,” we might fairly respond, “No kidding!” It seems self-evident that miraculous gifts would cease in heaven.

3. The “complete” might be the maturity of the church. This word *teleion* normally means “mature” or “complete” (cf. Mt. 5:48; 19:21; 1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Phil. 3:15; Col. 1:28; 4:12; James 1:4; 3:2). Thus that would be the most natural way of reading the word. Moreover, the broader context of chapters 12-14 deals with this issue of “growing up.” This third theory would argue that as the church matured, the miraculous, foundational gifts would be laid aside. This understanding would account for the historical decline of the miraculous during the 12th – 18th centuries.⁴⁵

Yet this brings up two other questions. First, what constitutes maturity of the church? Such things as the development of Apostolic doctrine, the completion of the canon, the establishment of leaders, geographic and ethnic expansion, international recognition (i.e. not being viewed as a cult), translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular, etc., would contribute to the maturity of the church and the minimizing of the need for miraculous manifestations both for evangelism and edification. Second, are tongues still available today? If the “perfect” is the canon, then “no.” If the “perfect” is the second coming, then “yes.” If the “perfect” is the maturity of the church, then a qualified “maybe.” Depending on when and where the church needs special verification then the Holy Spirit might use this gift. As the church matures, however, one would expect the foundational gifts to be laid aside.⁴⁶

1 Corinthians 14:20-25 -- How are tongues a sign to unbelievers? This is a terribly difficult text because it looks like verse 22 contradicts verses 23. First Paul says, “Tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers” (v. 22). And, in fact, that is how they functioned in the book of Acts. Then he turns right around and says how *ineffective* tongues are since unbelievers simply say, “you’re out of your mind” (v. 23). So, are tongues good for unbelievers or bad? There are two clues to understanding this text. First, verses 24-25 say that prophecy brings unbelievers to their knees in repentance while tongues merely allow them to mock the church. Building on his previous argument, Paul continues to prove how essential interpretation is to the gift of tongues for interpreted tongues equal prophecy, which can bring unbelievers to their knees. Paul is not saying tongues are bad, but uninterpreted tongues are bad. They are unhelpful for the edification of the church (vv. 1-12) and they are ineffective in evangelism (vv. 20-25). The second clue comes from verse 21, ““Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,” says the Lord.” This passage is a quotation from Isaiah 28:11. Here God is threatening Israel’s obstinate leaders with exile in Assyria. Israel’s priests are compared to babbling drunkards (which is hardly a

⁴⁵ This is not to suggest that suddenly the church of the 18th century became immature again. The issue of the rise of glossolalia in modern times is a separate issue.

⁴⁶ One possible exception to this, of course, would be if we were entering into a new era in which miracles were essential for the survival of the church, such as the final days prior to Christ’s return. This, of course, would be difficult to substantial, although many have posited precisely this.

commendation). This whole section seems like a backhanded compliment.⁴⁷ Although tongues are supposed to be a sign for unbelievers, left uninterpreted, they only cause confusion outside the church as well as in.⁴⁸ They could have been helpful, but the way they were being practiced made them a stumbling block.⁴⁹

1 Corinthians 14:26-28 -- What kind of parameters does Paul place on tongues? While Paul recognized the immense blessing tongues could be, he also required that they be practiced in an orderly fashion. Thus, he places a number of stipulations on exercising the gift of tongues: (1) Whatever is done must be for the edification of the church (v. 26). (2) Only two or three persons per service should speak in tongues (v. 27, 30). (3) Each had to take his/her turn and not speak all at once (vv. 27, 30). (4) Each tongue had to be interpreted (v. 27-28). This was so critical, in fact, that anyone who spoke in a tongue should also ask God for the gift of interpretation (v. 13). (5) Discerning people should arbitrate these messages to insure they were valid (v. 29). (6) Verse 34 may even imply that women should not practice this gift in the assembly. (7) Tongues were not to be forbidden, but should be subject to prophecy (v. 39, cf. v. 5). (8) Everything should be done orderly (v. 40).

What We Can Know About Tongues *Psychologically*

Glossolalia is clearly an odd behaviour, humanly speaking. It is only natural that psychologists (as well as philologists and sociologists) would investigate such phenomena. Some may say, "Those pagans are simply trying to explain away the work of God." Well, it is true that they are trying to investigate religious behavior through scientific means, but the fact is many of these psychologists are men and women of faith and some of them are even charismatics. To investigate religion is not necessarily to explain it away. Moreover, such studies often reveal important things about what we do and why. With this in mind, we want to investigate four important questions about tongues from a psychological perspective.

⁴⁷ Isbel goes even a step further: "This statement must be understood as a straw man which Paul sets up for the purpose of knocking it down. Evidently it had been the contention of the Corinthians that they practiced *glossolalia* in order to bring unbelievers to conversion. But Paul's own opinion on the matter was exactly the opposite. Outsiders or unbelievers who hear *glossolalia* will certainly say, "You are crazy" (14:23). By contrast, an outsider or unbeliever who hears *propheteialalia* will be "convicted by everyone, called to account [for his unbelief] by everyone, the secrets of his heart will be revealed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is certainly among you" (14:24-25). Charles D. Isbel, "*Glossolalia And Propheteialalia: A Study Of 1 Corinthians 14,*" August 14, 2001. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/theojrnl/06-10/10-2.htm>

⁴⁸ Cf. J. P. M. Sweet, "A Sign for Unbelievers: Paul's Attitude to Glossolalia," *New Testament Studies* 13 (1967) 240-57.

⁴⁹ Pentecostal theologians have offered an alternative explanation. Rather than Isaiah 28:11 being a backhanded compliment, it is a threat of judgment against those who refuse to believe. Mallone (p. 86) puts it this way, "By quoting Isaiah 28:11, Paul *is* referring to the foreign languages spoken by the Assyrians. The Assyrian tongues were a sign of judgment on Israel. But the focus of Paul's analogy is the *unintelligibility* and *judgment* of tongues, not tongues as foreign language. He is not trying to identify the Corinthian experience as a foreign language, but as a judgment upon unbelievers who do not (or *will* not) understand."

Do people who speak in tongues have a different personality profile? In other words are they weird or mentally ill? This question has been asked since the early days of Neo-Pentecostalism in the 1960's. One of the primary researchers on the personality of glossolalists was Kildahl.⁵⁰ He certainly would not call charismatics either weird or mentally ill; he did, however, label them as suggestible and regressive. Some of the following quotes are telling. "In subordinating one's own ego to that of the authority figure, the initiate is able to regress psychologically to a level of childlike openness, dependency, and suggestibility."⁵¹ "Without complete submission to the leader, speaking in tongues was not initiated."⁵² "It was not the speaking in tongues that brought the great feelings of euphoria that these people do experience. Rather it was the submission to the authority of the leader and to the sense of acceptance that followed this submission."⁵³ "Without exposure to a regressive group experience, glossolalia could not be induced."⁵⁴ "The importance of the leader was well illustrated by the fact that the style of glossolalia adapted by the group bore a close resemblance to the way in which the leader spoke. . . . It is not uncommon for linguists to be able to tell which prominent itinerant glossolalist has introduced a congregation to tongue-speaking."⁵⁵ Kildahl goes on state that 85% of the tongues speakers had experience a life crisis prior to speaking in tongues while only 30% of the non-tongue speakers had experienced such a crisis. He proposes that such crises set the stage for a person to speak in tongues.⁵⁶

This is powerful stuff. But there are two problems here. First, Kildahl's research is out of date. It was done in the late 1960's when the fledging neo-Pentecostal movement was just getting off the ground. Those attracted to such a counter-cultural movement and/or those needing such a transformational experience probably do not fairly represent the current participants in glossolalia. Second, Kildahl's study was done with only forty participants (twenty who did speak in tongues and twenty who did not).⁵⁷ That is hardly a fair representation of a multi-million person movement. While it is true that many charismatics are more "suggestible" or "dependent," Kildahl has hardly substantiated some kind of charismatic personality profile!

Moreover, recent studies have debunked this myth of the "suggestible charismatic." There is simply no conclusive evidence that one's personality differs positively or negatively as a result of glossolalia.⁵⁸ There is no identifiable personality trait that would explain why some

⁵⁰ John P. Kildahl, *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

⁵¹ John P. Kildahl, "Psychological Observations," in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research*. Ed. Watson E. Mills. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 356.

⁵² Kildahl, *Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* 50.

⁵³ Kildahl, *Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* 51.

⁵⁴ Kildahl, *Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* 59.

⁵⁵ Kildahl, *Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* 53.

⁵⁶ Kildahl, *Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* 58.

⁵⁷ Kildahl, *Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* 39.

⁵⁸ Newton Malony, "Debunking Some of the Myths About Glossolalia," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 34 (1982) 144-48. In fact, a number of studies have found some charismatics to be less suggestible than the average population. N. P. Spanos and E. C. Hewitt, "Glossolalia: A Test of the 'Trance' and Psychopathology Hypotheses," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 88/4 (1979) 427-34 and L. J. Francis and W. K. Kay, "The Personality Characteristics of Pentecostal Ministry Candidates," *Personality and Individual Differences* 18/5 (1995) 581-94.

people speak in tongues and others do not.⁵⁹ Glossolalists appear to be as “normal” as any other segment of society.

Do people experience an altered state of consciousness when they speak in tongues?

When people speak in tongues are they in some sort of trance, hypnotic state, or ecstatic experience? One of the earliest empirical experiments designed to answer this question was done by Goodman in the mid 1960's.⁶⁰ Her primary data came from four groups: (1) An English-speaking charismatic group on Saint Vincent Island, (2) a Pentecostal tent-revival in the Midwest, (3) a network television program in Texas called, “Divine Healing and Speaking in Tongues,” and (4) an Umbanda church (a spiritualist religious cult), in Brazil. Her analysis of the ecstatic behavior in each group was superb. Moreover, she discovered some striking similarities in the kinds of tongues spoken across cultural, linguistic, and ethnic lines. However, her data pool is pretty shallow. These four groups hardly represent mainstream charismatics of today. Did she discover ecstatic behavior in tongues? Absolutely. Does that mean that all tongues are ecstatic or dissociative behavior? Not by a long shot.

Another vein of research has compared tongues to hypnosis. These researchers are *not* saying that people who speak in tongues are hypnotized. What they are suggesting is that there are striking similarities between what goes on in many Pentecostal services and what takes place when a person is hypnotized. Kildahl says, “It is our thesis that hypnotizability constitutes the *sin qua non* of the glossolalia experience.”⁶¹ Again he says, “While glossolalia is not the same as hypnosis, it is similar to it and has the same roots in the relationship of the subject to the authority figure.”⁶² Cartledge argues that Pentecostal leaders are not purposely practicing hypnotic-type techniques but there are some significant similarities.⁶³ For example, passivity is encouraged as well as the emptying of the mind in an atmosphere of trust. Both the music and the preaching often have a rhythmical cadence that alternates between high intensity and lull. These environmental factors can contribute to hypnosis and are often associated with services where tongues are spoken.

Kildahl and Cartledge are undoubtedly correct that some sort of psychological manipulation often contributes to glossolalia. However, that certainly can not account for all incidents. Malony and Lovekin point out that tongues, in and of themselves, do not require a person to be in an altered state. Scientific studies of heart rate, electroencephalographic recordings of brain waves, skin conductance, etc. fail to demonstrate tongue speakers are in an altered mental state.⁶⁴ The fact is, many experienced glossolalists speak in tongues while driving,

⁵⁹ The closest we can come are the two traits of “suggestible” and “submissive.” According to Malony, Newton & Lovekin, Adams. *Glossolalia: Behavioral Science Perspectives on Speaking in Tongues*. New York: Oxford, 1985 (74) these seem to surface more than any other traits. Yet there is still no clear consensus in the empirical data.

⁶⁰ Felicitas Goodman. *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972).

⁶¹ Kildahl, *Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* 54.

⁶² Kildahl, *Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* 55.

⁶³ Mark J. Cartledge, “Interpreting Charismatic Experience: Hypnosis, Altered States of Consciousness and the Holy Spirit?” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 13 (1998) 117-132.

⁶⁴ Malony & Lovekin. In fact, Spanos says, “both ethnographic observations and experimental findings indicate that glossolalia can occur in the absence of kinetic activity, disorientation, and other purported indexes of trance, and that experienced glossolalics do not differ from nonglossolalic controls on measures of absorption in subjective experience and hypnotic susceptibility.”

doing dishes, etc. Do some have an ecstatic experience? Yes. Are some psychologically manipulated by a charismatic leader? Yes. But many (if not most) seem to practice tongues with full control of their mental faculties.

Is speaking in tongues a learned behavior? Most often, yes. According to Samarin, there are rare cases of spontaneous glossolalia but for the most part the seeker receives a great deal of guidance and instruction.⁶⁵ Poythress, in fact, asserts that “free vocalization is a normal, God-given human capacity. The person who was unable to do it would be unusual. We regard free vocalization as abnormal only because, in our modern Western cultural milieu, people usually cease to do it after childhood.”⁶⁶ Spanos tested this empirically and found that people were, in fact, able to master the technique of glossolalia.⁶⁷ First, 60 subjects listened to a 60-second sample of genuine glossolalia. All subjects then tried to speak in tongues for 30 seconds. Some 20% spoke in tongues immediately without further training. The subjects were then divided into a control group and a group that received various kinds of training. Tests then showed that 70% of the trained subjects were now “fluent” in glossolalia. In some instances these “contrived” tongues were played for experienced glossolalists who were unable to detect which were fake and which were genuine. So it does appear that people can be trained to master free vocalization. Kildahl makes an interesting observation, however,

Most people can imitate a strange language for only a few sentences, then the easy syllables become obvious, and stammering and hesitation take the place of fluency. Tongue-speakers can go on almost endlessly in a fluid, easy manner. . . . Because their performance cannot be duplicated by non-tongue-speakers, even with strenuous conscious effort, a psychologist must say that glossolalia is not completely under the conscious control of the person who speaks in tongues.⁶⁸

What about people who speak in actual languages they've never learned? How do psychologists account for that? Stories abound about people who spoke in tongues in a church service where a missionary or a foreigner identified it as an actual language.⁶⁹ They are notoriously difficult to substantiate, however, usually coming second or third hand.⁷⁰ Kildahl says,

⁶⁵ William Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels*. (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1972) 51-52.

⁶⁶ Vern S. Poythress, “Linguistic and Sociological Analysis of Modern Tongues-Speaking: Their Contributions and Limitations,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 42/2 (1980) 473.

⁶⁷ Nicholas Spanos, *Et. Al.* “Glossolalia as Learned Behavior: An Experimental Demonstration,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 95 (1986) 21.

⁶⁸ Kildahl, *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues*, 35. Either that or persons really are able to master the art of free vocalizations.

⁶⁹ The most famous monograph filled with such testimonials is John L. Sherrill, *They Speak with Other Tongues* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1968).

⁷⁰ The 1906 Azusa Street revivals gave rise to the expectancy that the world would finally be evangelized because missionaries would no longer need to go through the laborious task of learning a foreign language. In the first issue of Azusa Street’s *The Apostolic Faith* (September 1906), the belief in xenolalia was clearly set forth: “The gift of languages is given with the commission, ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.’ The Lord has given languages to the unlearned Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, German, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Zulu and languages of Africa, Hindu [sic] and Bengali and dialects of India, Chippewa and other languages of the Indians, Esquimaux, the deaf mute

There are no reported instances of a glossolalist speaking a language which was then literally translated by an expert in that language. Of the hundreds of thousands of occasions on which glossolalia has been uttered, there is no tape recording that can be translated from a language spoken somewhere in the world. My point is this: If glossolalic utterances were somehow real languages, it would seem that there would exist somewhere in the world evidence that the speaking in tongues was in fact in such a foreign language.⁷¹

What we do know is that there are few known instances where a person's glossolalia included a few phrases or some scattered sentences that resembled an actual known language. Generally the person had been exposed to the language at some point in their past and was recalling phrases that had been embedded in their memory. While this represents an unusual psychological process (known as cryptomnesia), it is not likely miraculous. We certainly do not doubt the power of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, these instances hardly resemble the phenomenon of Acts 2.

Do tongues actually benefit those who use them? The answer to this is an overwhelming affirmative.⁷² Samarín lists a number of benefits of tongues both psychologically and socially:⁷³ (1) It is the **symbol** of a dramatic conversion, a marker, so to speak, of a new way of life. (2) It is **proof** of God's influence and acceptance of that person. (This is also a social function when done in public). (3) It is a sign of **submission**. Since it requires total acquiescence, including a bit of embarrassment for many, it involves great emotional release. (4) It is **pleasurable**. It is a new and interesting skill that can be mastered. It is also a physical release while disengaging the mind, which is a significant psychological experience. Some even experience a trance-like state or ecstasy. (5) It is a way of **expressing emotion** that cannot be vented through cognitive prayers because they are too deep or too personal. This pertains to both prayers of praise and petition. (6) It can, in fact, be a **therapeutic** exercise, cleansing the mind and soul. Malony and Lovekin concur that "Depression among most glossolalists is reduced and remains low over time . . . they become more spontaneous and better able to cope with anxiety."⁷⁴ Brock even claims that tongues produce enkephalins and endorphins which boost the immune system and generate a feeling akin to a "runner's high."⁷⁵ (7) Tongues create **solidarity** among participants. It is a social behavior that is unique to their group. (8) Because glossolalia is a unique behavior, it **demarkates** one group from other Christian groups. It even gives many charismatics a sense of superiority by authenticating them as specially gifted by God. (9) Tongues can be a way of

language and, in fact the Holy Ghost speaks all the languages of the world through His children"[6]. This expectation was soon abandoned and the definition of tongues took on a more "angelic" halo. For specific historic details see Gary B. McGee, "Shortcut to Language Preparation? Radical Evangelicals, Missions, and the Gift of Tongues," *International Bulletin of Missions Research* 25/3 (July 2001) 118-123.

⁷¹ Kildahl, *Psychological Observations*, 363.

⁷² As was stated earlier, tongues can be a painful and negative experience if the ability fades or if the individual is rejected or disillusioned by the leader who led them to the practice. Cf. Malony & Lovekin, 185ff.

⁷³ Samarín, *Tongues of Men and Angels* (New York: Collier-MacMillan, 1972).

⁷⁴ Malony & Lovekin 185.

⁷⁵ Raymond T. Brock, "The Therapeutic Value of Speaking in Tongues," *Paraclete* 23 (1989) 26. He also claims that speaking in tongues helps overcome anorexia, bulimia and homosexuality.

gaining **prestige** among a charismatic group. The speaker becomes the center of attention and recognized as God's spokesperson at that point. That can be pretty heady stuff, especially for a person who has no other significant social prestige. Interpretation of tongues is even more powerful, which is perhaps why it is typically reserved for church leaders. Prophecy and healing are more powerful still, and almost exclusive to clergy in most contexts. There is clearly a hierarchy of gifts that runs roughly parallel to leadership roles in the charismatic community. The bottom line is that tongue-speakers have experienced enormous benefits from its practice.

What We Can Know About Tongues *Sociologically*

Glossolalia is not a phenomenon unique to Christianity. It has been observed in vast array of nonchristian cultures and religions from Eskimoes to Africans, Indonesian, Borneo, Malaysian, Spanish, Haitian, Iraqi, Chinese, Japanese, Aborigines, Ethiopians, etc.; representing a variety of religion from Voodoo, Buddhism, dervishes, Islam, Mormonism, Shamanism, Peyote cult, etc. It even goes as far back in the literature as Herodotus who spoke of an inspired priest in Greece who suddenly spoke in a barbarian language, and Virgil who tells in the Aeneid of a Cumaean sibyl who spoke strangely while possessed.⁷⁶

This gives sociologists a pretty good array of material for comparative analysis. We have been able to discover a number of consistencies of glossolalia cross-culturally.⁷⁷ For example, "There seems to be considerable truth in the assertion that people do not speak in tongues unless they have heard about speaking-in-tongues, and to this should be added that on the whole they become glossolalists only if their customs permit them to."⁷⁸ Likewise, "Glossolalia in one form or another is found in religions that are tolerant of highly emotional individualistic behavior on the part of medicine men and their assistants."⁷⁹ More importantly, glossolalia tends to begin with the poorer social classes during periods of cultural upheaval.⁸⁰ Bunn says, "Glossolalia has been associated with lower social and economic classes for four thousand years and has had full acceptance only in countercultures."⁸¹ Thus, some sociologists have postulated that glossolalia is a form of social protest.⁸² Hinson, for example, traces the revival of tongues through history and

⁷⁶ Carlyl May, "A Survey of Glossolalia and Related Phenomena in Non-Christian Religions," *American Anthropologist* 58/1 (1956) 75-96 and George J. Jennings, "An Ethnological Study of Glossolalia," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* (March 1968). Ecstatic speech in general was first recorded in the Mari documents from Mesopotamia (c. 2000-1500 B.C.E.), John T. Bunn, "Glossolalia in Historical Perspective," in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research*. Ed. Watson E. Mills. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 168.

⁷⁷ It should be pointed out here that the xenolalia of Acts 2 was strikingly different than the glossolalia reported in pagan religions. Cf. William Graham MacDonald, "Biblical Glossolalia: Thesis 3," *Paraclete* 27 (1993) 7-14. It is also of interest that as a general rule, only in Christianity do the laity speak in tongues. Other religions reserve this exclusively for their priests and shamans (May 74).

⁷⁸ May 72. Malony and Lovekin add that over half of those involved in the charismatic movement had friends involved in it before they "converted." Of those outside the movement, only 9% have charismatic friends.

⁷⁹ May 73.

⁸⁰ Watson E. Mills, "Glossolalia as a Sociopsychological Experience," *Search* (Winter, 1973).

⁸¹ Bunn 177.

⁸² Neff points out that there have been three major revivals in American history. All came during periods of social unrest. Thus it could be suggested that tongues occurs during such periods, which

finds that in each case there was one of two social conditions at play: persecution and intellectualism. He proposes that during persecution, personal faith is validated through ecstatic experiences; through intellectualism, there is an emotional backlash.⁸³ Thus he suggests that tongues are not the cause of revival but the result of social forces. “The outbursts of tongues occurred after the revival movement had gathered its full momentum; then, it has tended to dwindle after the movement has passed its peak. This is true of the practice among Quakers, Methodists, Shakers, Mormons, and Irvingites.”⁸⁴ Thus tongues may be produced (or at least fostered) by social forces beyond the individual.

Furthermore, there seems to be a consist environment in which tongues are produced. Kildahl enumerates five classic conditions:⁸⁵ (1) Personal crisis, (2) friendship with a leader who is charismatic, (3) as trust develops between the leader and the convert, s/he is brought into a new circle of friends, (4) the convert is “indoctrinated” as to the meaning and value of tongues, (5) s/he is initiated in a highly charged emotional atmosphere.⁸⁶ Often those who have the gift surround the subject. A pastor or leader will lay hands on the person and encourage them to start speaking words they do know, then to let their jaw become loose and their tongues limp. They will be encouraged to simply speak whatever syllables come into their minds. All the while the group will encourage the seeker verbally to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. These five conditions obviously do not fit every charismatic person, but they cut a pretty broad swath over the movement. Goodman also points out that tongues typically take place in an atmosphere and structure of expectation. In other words, there is a time and place for tongues and people attending services where they are expected, somehow pick up on the subtle clues of appropriate timing and exercise of the gift.

This is not to say that tongues are not from the Holy Spirit.⁸⁷ It is to say, however, that they are socially conditioned. Cultural forces often sets the stage for when and how a revival such as glossolalia might take place. Moreover, individual religious communities monitor and perpetuate corporate behaviors, such as tongues, through specific (albeit subtle) social cues. If we did not believe that, it would be difficult to explain why Christian glossolalia is so similar to glossolalia in other religious groups⁸⁸ (unless, of course, one resorted to the argument that Satan is masquerading as an angel of light).

partially account for the phenomenon. Richard Neff, “The Cultural Basis for Glossolalia in the Twentieth Century,” in *Speaking in Tongues: Let’s Talk About It* (Waco: Word Books, 1973).

⁸³ Hinson 193.

⁸⁴ Hinson 202.

⁸⁵ Kildahl, *Psychological Observations* 352.

⁸⁶ Malony and Lovekin 130f., identify three other psycho-social factors that surround the phenomenon: (1) A person’s need for personal, experience-based relationship with the divine. (2) Dissatisfaction with the church or society. (3) Personal crisis – health, family, job, etc.

⁸⁷ Edward Graham, “Do the Deaf Speak in Tongues?” *Paraclete* 24 (1990) 21-27, has a fascinating defense of the reality of tongues. He argues that since the deaf speak in tongues, and since they are unable to mimic tongues behavior since they are deaf (which is questionable), then tongues must be from God.

⁸⁸ Goodman’s cross cultural study showed that tongues were very similar across religious, geographic and ethnic lines. Thus, she postulated that they had a similar psychoneural source as a human phenomenon which transcended cultural peculiarities. For further information on this point, see Gerhard F. Hasel, *Speaking in Tongues* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1991) 30.

What We Can Know About Tongues *Linguistically*

Yamana kita siyanayasi
Anakiyana tiyasnaya anakiyatana, siyanayasi

Tata-sa, tata-sa-tarishti, tata-sa-te
Tata-vate-sa-taristi
Tata-tatasitiwi

These are two separate examples of actual transcriptions of tongues. There have been thousands of such vocalizations that have been scrutinized by linguists to determine how closely they resemble known human languages. Samarin and Goodman have been leaders in this effort. Between these two scholars a number of significant characteristics have been identified.

First, the average traditional language utilizes about thirty phonemes (i.e. distinct sounds).⁸⁹ The least used in a traditional language is thirteen (in a certain Hawaiian dialect). Many glossas utilize about six. This does not necessarily mean they are not real languages, but if they are, they appear to be very elementary languages. Second, glossolalists tend to utilize the phonemes common in his/her native language.⁹⁰ Thus, tongues only sound foreign because the familiar sounds are arranged in unfamiliar ways, not because they vocalize foreign phonemes. Mayers puts it this way,

Tongues, among English-speaking subjects, is composed of the basic speech elements of English. . . . Further the elements of speech involving pauses, breaths, intonations, and so on are markedly reduced and modified. They resemble the early speech qualities of young children prior to the organization of all the variables associated with adult language.⁹¹

Although it is fascinating to note that local dialects do not necessarily intrude into glossas.⁹² That is, individual phonemes are pronounced with common diction rather than idiosyncratic regional dialects (e.g. Texans tend not to “drawl” in tongues). Third,

There is generally a sharper break between the most and least common sounds than in natural languages, and the same is true of syllables and sequences of syllables. What this means is that certain units are being overworked. This cannot happen in normal language, because the occurrence of sounds is determined by the words they occur in, and the words are largely determined by the message that the speaker wants to encode.⁹³

Put simply, real language is quite complex; glossas are not. Only certain components of the complex language system are utilized. It may sound like a complex language to the casual

⁸⁹ Samarin 125.

⁹⁰ Samarin 83.

⁹¹ Marvin K. Mayers, “The Behavior of Tongues,” in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research*. Ed. Watson E. Mills. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 408.

⁹² Samarin 87.

⁹³ Samarin 126-27.

observer. But when the nuts and bolts are recorded on paper, there are a few bolts missing. Goodman adds another set of linguistic characteristics of tongues; only her observations are even broader since they are made across cultural and linguistic lines:

(1) “Every pulse begins with a consonant and there are no initial consonant clusters” and pulses nearly always end with a vowel. (2) “Bars are usually of equal duration . . . as one would do in music.” (3) The accent system is one of stress and is quite consistent. (4) Phrases are of equal length. (5) Glossolalia tends to become stereotyped – it tends to sound the same. (6) One’s glossa tends to sound like the glossa of the person who led them into the behavior. (7) Intensity tends to wane over time.⁹⁴

Some of these linguistic observations are quite complex. But they are made here to help us answer a very important question: *Are tongues real languages?* It appears that they are not. Charles Hockett has identified sixteen features that appear to be universal to every known human language.⁹⁵ Glossolalia lacks a number of key features. This leads Samarin to conclude, “Glossolalia is fundamentally *not* language. All specimens of glossolalia that have ever been studied have produced no features that would even suggest that they reflect some kind of communicative system.”⁹⁶ Another devastating feature to the reality of glossolalia as a language is its interpretation. Specifically, when recordings of glossa were played for those who claimed to have the gift of interpretation, each interpreter gave very different meanings to the text.⁹⁷ Furthermore, in written glossa, the interpreters gave different meanings to identical words in the same set of words. When confronted with this inconsistency, the interpreters simply said, “God gave different interpretations.”⁹⁸ Perhaps, as some charismatics claim, glossolalia lacks the design features of human language and incorporates multiple interpretations since it is really an angelic language not subject to the rules of earthly language. We have no response to such an argument.

One last observation is important here. Just because glossolalia does not communicate verbal or cognitive meaning, does not mean that it does not communicate. Groans, vocal inflections, sighs, pauses, gestures, and mannerism are all critical communicative tools, which are fully operational in tongues. Thus, while tongues may not consist of cognitive meaning, it is full of affective communication. The same thing happens when one watches a foreign film. You can’t know everything that is said, but the basic plot is pretty clear. This is perhaps how interpreters of tongues sense the general emotion of the speaker and can articulate the

⁹⁴ Goodman 121-122.

⁹⁵ Charles F. Hockett, “The Problem of Universals in Language,” in *Universals of Language*, ed. J. H. Greenberg. (Cambridge, 1963). For specific details on these “design features” see Eugene A. Nida *Glossolalia: A Case of Pseudo-Linguistics Structure*, Unpublished paper delivered at the 39th Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (New York City, December 28, 1964) and William Samarin, “The Linguisticity of Glossolalia.” *The Hartford Quarterly* 8/4 (1968) 49-75.

⁹⁶ Samarin 227. This is in direct contradiction to the claims of Sherrill, “. . . although no language known to these men was recorded, they had frequently identified language *patterns* on the tapes. The ‘shape’ of real language, the variety of sound combinations, infrequency of repetition and so forth, is virtually impossible, so they said, to reproduce by deliberate effort” (p. 113).

⁹⁷ Kildahl *Psychological Observations* 361

⁹⁸ Samarin 186.

“atmosphere” of the speech act. Thus we conclude by suggesting that glossolalia is not a language but it is communicative.

Conclusion

It has not been my intent to defend or promote glossolalia in this paper. It has certainly not been my intent to limit, squelch, or deny the work of the Holy Spirit. My intention is rather simple. I hope to have shed some light on a very complex and fascinating phenomenon that has been clouded by much human arrogance and defensiveness on both sides of the charismatic divide. If you see with greater clarity the complexity of this issue than before, I shall be deeply satisfied. Let me conclude by saying that the Holy Spirit is alive and well. His greatest work is not promoting the gifts but promoting the Christ. He is most deeply interesting in the proclamation of the gospel and the edification of the church, the precious bride of Christ. Therefore, the real question is not, “Do you have the Holy Spirit,” but “Does the Holy Spirit have you?”

Questions for Discussion:

1. Give a brief summary of the rise of glossolalia in the 20th century.
2. Are tongues human languages? Are they different in Acts and 1 Corinthians?
3. How should tongues be practiced in the church and/or in a person’s private life? Or have they ceased altogether?
4. What are the benefits and dangers of tongues both for the body of Christ and for the individual?
5. How are tongues a social phenomenon? How are they used in other religious/cultural groups?

Essential Reading:

Kildahl, John P. *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

Malony, Newton & Lovekin, Adams. *Glossolalia: Behavioral Science Perspectives on Speaking in Tongues*. New York: Oxford, 1985.

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