

GLOSSOLALIA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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It is obvious to even the casual reader of the New Testament that the phenomenon described by the term “Glossolalia” played a significant role in the early church. Some of the questions that immediately come to mind as one analyzes this phenomenon are: (1) What experiences of the early church are to be included in this category? (2) What is the significance and relevance of these experiences in the life of the early church? (3) How are these experiences to be evaluated in terms of their present-day possibility? Such questions have given rise to our current discussions on Glossolalia. We shall seek to deal with the first two of these.

I. The Material to be Included in Glossolalia.

The term “Glossolalia” is an English word constructed from two Greek terms: the noun *γλωσσα* (tongues) and the verb *λαλειν* (to speak). The fusion of these two Greek words is proper since in the New Testament these are the words used to describe a distinct phenomenon. This phenomenon is described by only these two terms. The verb *λαλειν* is used with the noun *γλωσσα* in the dative case (dative of means, instrument). This construction occurs 16 times — 12 times with *γλωσσα* in the plural (*γλωσσαις*), and 4 times in the singular, *γλωσση*.

The term *γλωσσα* literally means “tongue,” the organ of speech. In Greek, as in English, an extended meaning of the term is “language” or “dialect.” The verb *λαλεω* is generally translated “to speak.” It is the only verb used with *γλωσσα* to describe the phenomenon under consideration — a fact of no mean significance. The New Testament has other words to describe the act of speaking: *λεγω*, *ειπον*, *φδεγγουαι* — but none of these occur with the noun *γλωσσα* in either dative or accusative case. The verb *λαλεω* occurs throughout the history of the Greek language. Its general meaning “to speak,” “to talk,” but basically it conveys the idea of chattering, a kind of inarticulate speech. This appears to be present onomatopoeically in the verb itself — *λαλεω λα-λα-λα*. The relative rare noun *λαλλαι* (pebbles) is related to this verb, from the prattling of pebbles in a stream. Similarly, the verb *λαλαγεω* means “to babble,” and the noun *σ λαλαξ* means “babblers,” “croaker.” In Koine Greek, including New Testament usage, this verb often is synonymous with *λεγω*. However, its exclusive usage in describing the phenomenon under discussion points to the character of this speech. Although using the same verb (*λαλεω*) in both cases, Paul alludes to this same aspect when he writes in I Corinthians 14:9 — “in church I would rather speak five words with my mind (*τω νοι μου λαλησαι*), in order to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue (*εν γλωσση*).”¹

Another feature of this idiom, *λαλειν γλωσσαις* that it appears to be unique in the New Testament. It does not appear in classical Greek to describe one’s speaking in a foreign language. The verbs used with *γλωσσα* to express this are: *ειναι*, *χρησθαι*, *νομιζειν*. The idiom appears twice in the LXX — both times in the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah 19:18 five cities of Egypt are described as those “which speak the language of Canaan (*λαλουσαι τη γλωσση τη χαναανιτιδι*).” In chapter 28:11 Isaiah declares that the Lord will speak to Israel “with an alien tongue (*δια γλωσσης ετυρας . . . λαλησει*).” Paul employs this passage in I Cor. 14:21 in his discussion of Glossolalia. The idiom does not occur at all in the Apostolic Fathers.

In the New Testament the idiom is found in only two of the twenty-seven books. There is one occurrence in the Longer Ending of Mark, but on the basis of both internal and external evidence this passage cannot be declared authentic.

Furthermore, the adjunct *καιναις* to *γλωσσαις* in this doubtful passage, although missing in some manuscripts, adds a dimension not found elsewhere in the New Testament. All the other occurrences are found in Acts and I Corinthians.

There are four occurrences of the idiom in Acts (2:4, 11; 10:46; and 19:6). The first two describe the situation at the time of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Clearly the existence of the phenomenon was an evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Luke quite clearly indicates that the phenomenon was a consequence of being filled with the Holy Spirit *επλησθησαν παντες αγιον*² (2:4). The activity is described as speaking in other tongues *λαλειν ετεραις γλωσσαις* 2:4). The amazement of those who heard would indicate that this was speech other than the native tongue of those who were speaking. On the other hand, this was not a strange or foreign speech to those who heard — in fact, it was very intelligible and this was the striking fact. The hearers observed that they were hearing these Galileans in their own native language *τη ιδια διαλεκτω* (2:8; cf. vs. 6), and their own tongues *ημετεραις γλωσσαις* (2:11). Obviously, this was clear, intelligible speech which needed no interpreter or interpretation. This feature of the Pentecost experience must be recognized in a consideration of Glossolalia. A significant aspect of the Pentecost experience was the miracle of hearing as well as that of speaking — in fact, this may be the major emphasis.

The next occurrence of this phenomenon is found in Acts 10:46. The occasion is at the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. In a realistic way through a vision, God revealed to Peter the mission to the Gentiles — a lesson extremely hard for Peter to learn. This received immediate implementation with the ministry to Cornelius, a Gentile, but quite obviously a proselyte. Nevertheless, this was a significant transition in the ministry of Peter and his fellow Jewish Christians. Apparently, the apostles did not recognize this mission to the Gentiles as taught by Jesus. Their Jewish orientation blinded them to the larger vision of a mission to the Gentiles. We may be critical of their obstinacy, and rightly so; but the mission to Cornelius was an eloquent reminder to the Jewish Christians. Its validation was the same as that on Pentecost — the presence of the Spirit. This was precisely the argument Peter used to defend his action of admitting Gentiles — “the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning” (11:15; cf. vs 17). The evidence of the Holy Spirit was the speaking in tongues *αυτων λαλουντων γλωσσαις* (10:46). This so impressed Peter so that he proceeded to baptize these Gentiles (10:47f) and his later description to the Jewish Christians was so convincing that they were silenced and glorified God (11:18). Clearly, the speaking in tongues was not an end in itself, but with a view to meet a specific need in the history and thinking of the early church.

An interesting similarity of this “speaking with tongues” at Caesarea with that in Jerusalem at Pentecost is that both activities engaged in the praising of God. In Acts 2:11 the speakers are described as “telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (*τα μεγαλεια του θεου*) and in 10:46 the speakers are “extolling God (*αυτων . . . μεγαλυνοντων τον θεον*).”

In addition, it seems legitimate to characterize the speaking in tongues at Caesarea as clear intelligible speech, as at Jerusalem. The people that had to be convinced were “the believers from among the circumcision” (10:45) For them to recognize these Gentiles as extolling God would seem to require that they would understand what the Gentiles were saying. Otherwise, it would seem to be a strange proof or validation of the Spirit’s presence.

The third instance of speaking with tongues in Acts is found in 19:6. Upon

arrival at Ephesus on his third missionary journey Paul encountered about twelve disciples whose Christian experience was limited, to say the least. It is interesting to note that Luke describes them as disciples (*μαθηται*) without any qualifiers. In the Lucan writings such a designation is restricted to disciples of Jesus. That these were followers of Jesus, i.e., they were Christians in some qualified sense is also borne out by Paul’s reference to faith — “when you believed.” However, they had been baptized into John’s baptism — just as Apollos who knew only the baptism of John but nevertheless knew and taught the things concerning Jesus. This John the Baptist cult may have had some footing in Alexandria. The response of these disciples at Ephesus to the question of Paul, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit?” might suggest their ignorance regarding the spirit — “No, we did not hear that there is a Holy Spirit.” It is hard to imagine a follower of John the Baptist being ignorant about the Holy Spirit. The Baptist references to the Spirit surely must have been remembered by his disciples. The statement of Acts 19:2 should be interpreted as the statement in John 7:39 where the same construction occurs, but obviously refers to the fact that the Spirit had not yet been given, rather than that he did not exist. Hence, the Ephesian disciples had not heard about the giving or outpouring of the Spirit — in other words they were ignorant regarding the event of Pentecost.

Following the instruction by Paul, baptism and the laying on of hands, the Holy Spirit came upon these disciples. The concomitant of the Holy Spirit was the speaking with tongues and prophesying. In view of their doubts regarding the Holy Spirit, validation by means of these signs was as essential for these twelve disciples as for those on the day of Pentecost. Hence, in view of the parallel situations, one can conclude that the speaking with tongues served the same purpose in both cases — validation, confirmation, authentication, not instruction or edification.

Some suggest that the conversion of the Samaritans in Acts 8 also involved the phenomenon of speaking with tongues. The account does not explicitly say so, and any such affirmation is by inference only. Personally, I would question the presence of the phenomenon since Luke seems to insist on recounting it in those crucial situations if it happened. However, if one would grant the possibility, it could still be argued that this event is in many ways parallel to the other three situations in Acts in which overt validation and authentication were demanded by the circumstances.

The only other discussion of this phenomenon in the New Testament is found in I Corinthians 12-14. From all appearances the Corinthian church caused Paul more headaches and heartaches than any other church. Paul organized this church during his second missionary journey (c. A.D. 50-51). The epistle, perhaps erroneously called I Corinthians, was written from Ephesus during Paul’s third missionary journey about A.D. 54. In Luke’s account of the founding of this church in Acts 18 no mention is made of the speaking with tongues.

In I Cor. 12:4-13 Paul gives a catalog of spiritual gifts. He lists nine gifts concerning which he gives the following concluding comment: “All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (12:11). Number 8 in this catalog is “various kinds of tongues (*γενη γλωσσων*).” “In verses 27-31 Paul gives a list of these spiritual gifts in a descending order of importance. At the top of the list is “apostles” and at the bottom is “various kinds of tongues” (*γενη γλωσσων*). Apparently, there were those at Corinth who had upset this order and were placing undue priority on “tongues.”

What was taking place at Corinth must be distinguished from the experiences reported in Acts. The following principal differences must be recognized:

1) The phenomenon at Corinth involved an unintelligible speech which could not be understood by the auditors unless there was an interpreter or interpretation. Such was not required in the experiences on Pentecost, Caesarea, or Ephesus, as recorded in Acts.

2) The purpose of the phenomenon at Corinth was edification — for the individual and/or church, if there be an interpreter. In Acts it was validation, verification, authentication of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

3) The phenomenon in Acts was restricted to very special situations in the early church when there was a pressing need for evidence of the Spirit's presence. In Corinth such a need did not exist, and if it did, there were other signs or gifts to establish this.

In the light of the foregoing it is difficult to maintain a continuity between the phenomenon in Acts and that reported in I Corinthians. The Acts phenomenon was highly restricted with a view to the growth and expansion of the church. It obviously was not a phenomenon current in every church or an experience common to believers. It is significant that the only situation in the early church where it did become a common phenomenon was in Corinth — and there it apparently was being misused. In view of this singular localization and Paul's restrictive commentary, the Corinthian situation can hardly be considered normative.

That this phenomenon should be localized at Corinth does not strike one as strange when he studies the societal, cultural and religious character of pagan Corinth. Corinth was a commercial city whose evils were so well-known that a verb *κορινθιαζομαι* meaning "to practice fornication" was coined. Her religion was dominated by the over-shadowing Acro-Corinth with the temple of Aphrodite and her thousand priestesses. In addition, the Greek oracles with their frenzied priests and priestesses provided a fertile environment for the phenomenon of tongues in Corinth. One can readily understand that this problem should arise at Corinth and also receive undue stress, whereas it did not arise at such a place as Philippi.

As indicated above, this church had spiritual, theological, and moral difficulties. These immature Christians at Corinth misused the spiritual gifts in an attempt to face these problems — and the result was greater abuse and difficulty.

II. Significance and Relevance of the Phenomenon.

From Paul's discussion in I Cor. 12-14, the following observations must be made:

1) "Speaking in tongues" is definitely of a lower order in the hierarchy of spiritual gifts.

2) In the congregational situation "speaking in tongues" must be accompanied by interpretation — and, where such interpretation is lacking, the phenomenon becomes useless and for the good of the assembly must be avoided. The absence of the interpretation raises serious doubt about the validity and usefulness of "speaking in tongues."

3) "Speaking in tongues" is basically a personal experience (14:4) whereby one edifies (*οικοδομει*) himself. In this respect it differs from and is inferior to prophecy which is for the edification of the church. For the personal experience of "speaking in tongues" to have communal value an interpretation is required. Only in this way can the intensely personal experience have relevance to the community.

4) "Speaking in tongues" is intended as a sign (*σημειον*) for the unbelievers, not the believers (*οι πιστευοντες*). However, to be effective it obviously must be accompanied by an interpretation — lest the uninitiate think the believers to be mad (14:23). This also points up the importance of the "interpretation" — which must accompany the phenomenon.

Paul's discussion about "tongues" as being a "sign" hardly allows much practical value to the phenomenon. In Cor. 14:22 he sets up the neat parallelism:

a) tongues for a sign not to believers but unbelievers.

b) prophecy (for a sign) not to unbelievers but believers.

He bases this parallelism on a quotation derived from "the Law," obviously a reference to the Old Testament (Jn. 10:34; 12:34; 15:25). This is a quotation of Isaiah 28:11f which does not correspond exactly with either the LXX or the Masoretic text.³ However, to call this a free translation or a paraphrase is also questionable. Paul may be using another text tradition. The context in Isaiah is a warning to the Israelites. Jehovah declares that he is going to speak to them through non-Israelites — the Assyrians. The people of God had not listened to the word of the prophets and now through the barbarian tongue of the Assyrian the message will come, but still they will refuse to hear. On the basis of this quotation Paul introduces the above parallelism by the word *ωστε* — "consequently." Commentators have been puzzled by Paul's train of thought in these verses. The situations in Jerusalem in Isaiah's time and in Corinth in Paul's time are not exactly parallel. The speech referred to by Isaiah is obviously an existing foreign language spoken by pagan Assyrians. The hearers are the unbelieving Israelites who had heard the Word of the Lord before. At Corinth the speech consists of unknown miraculous sounds (cf. vs. 18) spoken by believers and the hearers are *ιδιωται* and *απιστοι* who apparently had not heard the Word before. Obviously, the parallel cannot be pressed along these lines.

The solution lies in the proper delimitation of the term *σημειον*. The *σημειον* is not the continued unbelief and hardness of heart exemplified by the Israelites. The *σημειον* is that God reveals Himself — speaks to people — in various ways: in this case the universe of discourse is languages and tongues. Grosheide is correct in finding the tertium comparationis in the twice occurring *ετερος* (*ετερογλωσσοις, ετερον*).⁴ Because of the Israelites' unbelief, God now speaks to them through the Assyrians in a new way which is surely not as clear, eloquent, intelligible as that word spoken by the prophets. Similarly, in the New Testament another way of God's speaking is through "tongues" for a specific purpose. Tongues are intended to be a sign, proof, evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. For one who has faith — *ο πιστευων* (note the present participle) such validation, confirmation, authentication is not necessary. Hence, it becomes a sign for the *απιστος* — the doubtful, insecure, unconvinced, unpersuaded, unstable. This purpose and role of "tongues" can also be seen in Acts. At Caesarea the believers in the Circumcision Party had to be convinced. At Ephesus the twelve disciples (believers in a sense) had to be convinced. In the latter case tongues became a sign to the persons themselves, which Paul also suggests in I Cor. 14:2 and 4. It is not with a view to the conversion of the individual, but with a view to convincing or persuading him with regard to the presence and experience of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, *απιστοι* in I Cor. 14:22 must be distinguished from *ιδιωται η απιστοι* in 14:23.⁵ The latter phrase describes people outside the church and unbelievers. A *απιστοι* in I Cor. 14:22 perhaps ought to be translated "the unconvinced" within the church. Jesus admonishes Thomas, "Do not be faithless (*απιστος*), but believing (*πιστος*)" (Jn.

20:27). Hence, tongues become a sign for those whose Christian experience is limited and who lack full conviction, assurance, and confidence of the Spirit's presence.

The above approach is also suggested by the exhortation with which Paul introduces this discussion: "Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature (*τελειοι*)" (14:20). Since Paul has been urging the superiority of prophecy over tongues and if the other gifts are above prophecy in the scale of spiritual gifts, it would seem that seeking these gifts rather than tongues would be a mark of maturity. Conversely, undue emphasis on tongues would reflect immaturity. In 14:14 Paul suggests that in the use of tongues his mind is unfruitful (*ακαρπος*). Hence to be mature (*τελειος*) in one's thinking (*φρην*), one would not employ tongues. In fact, for the purpose of instruction Paul definitely would not employ tongues (14:19).

On the other hand, "tongues" have no kerygmatic value — in fact, they hinder the proclamation of the gospel. In contrast to prophecy which can lead to conversion (14:24f), "tongues" actually will drive someone from the Gospel and the Church with the observation, "they are mad." Without an interpretation, "tongues" are detrimental to the witness of the church.

From the practical standpoint, in the light of Paul's demand for an interpretation and the danger of misunderstanding on the part of the unbeliever, "tongues" are certainly limited in usefulness and virtually undesirable as a communal activity.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The use of *εν* with *γλωσση* appears to be a variation of the normal simple dative of instrument or means construction.
2. The use of the anarthous form, *πνευμα αγιον*, should not be pressed, since the New Testament usage is not consistent, although only certain fixed combinations occur.
3. E.g. the first verb is *λαλησω* in I Cor. 14:21; *λαλησουσιν* in LXX, "he will speak" in MT.
4. *Commentaar*, p. 368; *Commentary on First Corinthians*, p. 310.
5. Lenski (Interpretation of I and II Corinthians, p. 613) suggest that this combination denotes one and the same class. "'Or' is here not disjunctive, but conjunctive and definitive, as it is again in v. 24, and as it is in Luke 20, 2" (*ibid.*).