

Glossolalia (Speaking in Tongues)

One of the more interesting phenomena in the New Testament is *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues), which appeared to have died out in the second century but made a comeback at the dawn of the twentieth. This issue examines the biblical record of tongues and recent developments. I should preface my remarks by stating that I have not spoken in tongues, nor have I ever heard anyone do so, but I have known at least two people who say they have.

Then

The two men stopped about a mile from the outskirts of the great city emerging from the plains of Shinar. Staying mounted on their restless camels, they surveyed the incredible scene. Scores of buildings were nearing completion, but their eyes were inevitably drawn to the massive tower dominating the center of the construction. From their vantage point on the small hill to the south of the city, they could see the double court at the base of the tower and the two western gates. Inside the inner court, small temples ringed the walled platform. They knew the one on the south side was dedicated to Anu and Bel.

The tower itself consisted of seven stages of decreasing size, and they could see people climbing the stairs which ascended around each stage. A number of people were congregated at the resting place at the middle of the ascent. At the top stood the sanctuary of the God Bel-Merodach, where it was said, a large couch was laid beside a golden table.

"We're really somebody now, aren't we?" one of the men commented to the other. "Indeed," the other man replied. "We have almost become gods ourselves. Men have come from around the world to build and live in this city, yet with our unity and common language, there is nothing we cannot do!"

They beamed with obvious pride as they dug their heels into the flanks of their camels, urging them on. They were anxious to make their own place in the great new city.

Moments later, their camels balked as a great roar arose from the east, and they turned to see a wall of sand being driven toward the city by a powerful wind. Impossibly dark clouds seemed to instantly materialize directly above the city, and a single, huge bolt of lightning arced down directly through the center of the tower, vaporizing the upper sanctuary and raining thousands of bricks down on the scattering crowd below.

The two men gasped in even greater horror as they watched the walls of the three stages below the sanctuary split, sending the people who had been at the resting place tumbling pathetically to the ground. The great sandstorm from the east enveloped the city, obliterating the men's view momentarily. Almost as quickly as they appeared, both the roiling clouds and the sandstorm dissipated, and the men now saw that only the bottom three stages remained and great tongues of fire licked out the windows.

They stood silent for a time, unable to comprehend what they had seen.

Then they turned to one another and spoke simultaneously, but neither understood the other's words. Each frowned, wondering why his companion was speaking gibberish. More words, more confusion—now mixed with anger. Why, at a time like this, they both thought, is he playing silly games. Unable to communicate and

frightened beyond the capability of logical thought, each unsheathed his sword and brandished it at the other.¹

More than 2,000 years later, a group of men emerged from a substantial home in Jerusalem. A large crowd had gathered, drawn by the inexplicable fire that had engulfed the house moments earlier. These men should have met fiery deaths, but they each wore serene looks as they walked out into the teeming street. Throughout the crowd, people spoke but few understood one another. Most were Jews of the Diaspora, visiting to the holy city for the feast of weeks. They came from throughout the Mediterranean world: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopototamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylans, Egyptians, Libyans, Cyreneans, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs, all with their own native tongues. One of them, the tallest of the group—gray-haired and bearded—spoke: *"Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words."*

As the people looked around, they realized that everyone in the crowd understood this man. Some mocked the speaker, suggesting he and his companions were drunk even though it was early in the day. Others stood, open-mouthed, amazed at the events unfolding before them, wondering aloud what it all meant.

The speaker quoted from the prophet Joel, suggesting that the events they were witnessing were the fulfillment of his prophecies. He continued: *"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power."*

Some people shook their heads and walked away, but most remained, held not only by the man's words, but also by the unmistakable power in his voice. As he spoke, many began to weep, their consciences seared by the guilt that welled up within them. But underneath that guilt, a glimmer of hope began to grow. Two of the men in the crowd, strangers who spoke different tongues, turned to one another and embraced.²

¹ Information drawn from Genesis 11, Josephus, and the Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments

² Information drawn from Acts 2



The parallels between the Tower of Babel and the Day of Pentecost are compelling—the gathering of geographically-dispersed people, the confusion of languages, and the powerful force sent by God. In building the Tower of Babel, Man sought to reach the heavens, becoming as gods. To crush Man's arrogance, God destroyed the Tower, stopped the building of the city, and confounded Man's efforts by dividing us by language. In Jerusalem, God brought His continuing presence to the disciples, opening the earthly Kingdom of God, and brought understanding by unconfounding language.

It should not surprise us that God used language in these ways. After all, the Bible tells us that He spoke the universe into existence. James reminds us that *"the tongue is a small thing, but what enormous damage it can do."* (James 3:7) And, of course, Jesus Himself is referred to as the Word (John 1:15). Language is powerful, both as a redemptive power and a destructive force.

In *The Ancient Language of Eden* (Destiny Image, 2003), author Don Milam describes the nature of the conversations between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. What language do we suppose they used? That there is a distinct heavenly language is suggested by Paul's phrase, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels..." (1 Corinthians 1:13a).

Properly speaking, the phenomenon on the Day of Pentecost seems to be xenoglossia, speaking in foreign tongues, but were the Apostles speaking the many represented languages simultaneously? Notice what the listeners say: "how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?" (Acts 2:8) What language could the Apostles have been speaking that every person heard in their own tongue? While it is possible, I suppose, that the Apostles spoke in Aramaic, and God caused the listeners to understand, it seems more likely that this was an instance of the "new tongue" Jesus prophesied in Mark 16:17. The language of the Apostles was a form of God-given prophetic speech and a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Speaking in strange languages was not new to the New Testament. Paul, in fact, refers to one Old Testament instance in his discussion of glossolalia in 1 Corinthians: "In the Law it is written, 'By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,' says the Lord" (1 Corinthians 14:21, quoting Isaiah 28:11).

One web site, [Glossolalia—Supernatural Language](#), suggests that Jesus may have spoken in tongues. In this lengthy article, Jeffery Brian White cites three sayings of Jesus that were transliterated then interpreted:

* "**Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?**—My God, My God, why has thou forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)

* "**Talitha kum**—Little girl, I say to you, arise!" (Mark 5:41)

* "**Ephphatha!**—Be opened!" (Mark 7:34)

In all three cases, Jesus is addressing the Father—the latter two calling for His healing powers. White asks persuasively, "Why transliterate his prayerful question when its meaning in itself captures its full significance?"

There are two additional examples of glossolalia in Acts:

* Cornelius' household in Caesarea (Acts 10:34-48)

* The group of men in Ephesus who had only received the baptism of John (Acts 19:1-7)

Like the Day of Pentecost, these two incidents of *glossolalia* served a specific purpose. In the case of Cornelius and his household, it served to demonstrate to Peter that the Holy Spirit was available to Gentiles as well as Jews. In the case of the Ephesus men, it demonstrated that the Gospel was more than a matter of simple repentance.

The only extended biblical discussion of *glossolalia* is in 1 Corinthians 13-14, when it became a source of disunity among the church. While Paul acknowledges the value of *glossolalia*, it is clear he is not a big fan of its practice in the assembly. He says it is only temporary (1 Corinthians 13:8), it can be as disconcerting and dissonant as a gong or a cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:8), it can be self-seeking (1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 14:4), and it can be confusing and disordering (1 Corinthians 14:23). It is also instructive that Paul never mentioned *glossolalia* in any of his other letters, nor in his other lists of spiritual gifts, and my own reading of Paul suggests that he thinks glossolalia is to play little if any role in Christian assemblies. He certainly does oppose forbidding *glossolalia* (1 Corinthians 14:39), but he seems to consider it the least of spiritual gifts.

A major point of debate about glossolalia involves Paul's comment in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10: "*Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.*" All we know from these verses is that *glossolalia* will cease, but we do not know when. The interpretation of "the perfect" in verse 10 is has been ascribed to the completion of the New Testament, to the Second Coming of Christ, and to the afterlife.

Paul wrote to the Roman church about the intercession of the Holy Spirit in prayer: "*In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*" (Romans 8:26-27) Some have equated these intercessory prayers with *glossolalia*, but I believe they are different manifestations. *Glossolalia* is clearly intelligible speech, capable of being interpreted, whereas Spirit prayers appear to be unintelligible "*groanings* [Greek, ***stenagmos***] *too deep for words,*" understood by the Father, but perhaps not by people. Both are speech directed to God, but one (*glossolalia*) in a sign for unbelievers, while the other (*stenagmos*) edifies the individual. Furthermore, the gift of *glossolalia* is not given to all believers (1 Corinthians 12:30), while there is no reason to believe that the Spirit-driven prayer is not available to all believers.

I believe, therefore, that *glossolalia* is a gift of God related to His universal offer of reconciliation through Christ Jesus. Formerly, God separated people when they presumed to challenge His sovereignty. In Christ, He exercised that sovereignty by sacrificing Himself, in the form of the Son, on the cross for our sins. Despite all the words written in the Bible and elsewhere since, God's message to Mankind is not limited to human language. In fact, the Grace of God may be ultimately inexpressible in words. Could the language spoken by the first century believers be the original language used by God and Adam in the Garden?

There is no mention of *glossolalia* in the writings of the second and third century church fathers, supporting the claim by some that glossolalia disappeared at the end of the apostolic age (about 100 AD).

But Paul ties the end of *glossolalia* to a similar end to prophecy and knowledge. Are we willing to concede that these also ended in 100 AD or with the establishment of the New Testament Canon in the fourth century? To be faithful to the Word of God, I think we must at least consider the possibility that the gift of *glossolalia* is still active.

Now

Glossolalia is another of a nearly endless list of issues that divide the church. One camp insists that tongues are no longer active (along with other miraculous gifts) and that those who display the gift are demon-possessed. Another claims that those who don't speak in tongues are not true believers. And there are many other opinions in between. There are millions of Christians who claim to speak in tongues. The fact that the debate is so polemic (see, for example, [Bible Evidence for Catholicism](#) vs. [Duluth \(MN\) Bible Church](#)) suggests that there is a great deal of *glossolalia* that is not from God.

Historically, there is little if any evidence of *glossolalia* from the end of the first century until the beginning of the twentieth, when Charles Parham and a small Bible

group in Kansas began to speak in tongues after studying the Bible. Parham subsequently preached at the Azusa Street Mission Revival, and the tongues movement expanded rapidly from there.

If we accept that glossolalia was granted by the Holy Spirit at a time when paganism largely ruled the world and people needed evidence of the supernatural power of the one true God, isn't it possible that the same evidence is needed at a time when paganism is rebounding in many forms? Certainly there is a lot of fakery in today's displays of glossolalia, just as there are with miraculous healings. But isn't it arrogant to insist that we know precisely how God will and won't choose to act?

I once read (I think it was in his autobiography, *Sacred Hoops*) that Phil Jackson, one of the greatest coaches in the history of National Basketball Association, grew up in a charismatic tradition, where speaking in tongues served as a litmus test for faith. As I recall, when Jackson did not display the gift after professing Jesus, some older boys taught him how to fake it. Jackson now seems to follow a strange mixture of Buddhist Christianity.

One of the contestants in last week's \$1,000,000 "Fear Factor" on NBC "prayed in a spiritual language" as he prepared for the final stunt.

Here are four examples of information from the web that demonstrate the widely disparate views glossolalia among Christian groups today:

The doctrine of the [United Pentecostal Church International](#) states "There are two major evidences of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The initial, outward evidence is speaking with tongues, which means speaking miraculously in languages the speaker does not know... There are perhaps several other reasons why God chose speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of this spiritual baptism. It is an objective, external evidence that recipients and onlookers can both identify with certainty (Acts 10:46). It is a uniform evidence—all the disciples on Pentecost, all the household of Cornelius, and all the believers in Ephesus spoke in tongues. 'So is everyone that is born of the Spirit' are the words of Jesus in His description of this spiritual new birth (John 3:8). Speaking in tongues also indicates the complete control of the Spirit over our human wills. The tongue is the most unruly member of the body (James 3:8), and its being tamed by God is evidence of His complete control." Incidentally, the other evidence is considerably less controversial: the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23.

Likewise, the [Assemblies of God, USA](#) claim that "The baptism of believers in the Holy Ghost is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit of God gives them utterance."

[One Baptist site](#) has this to say about tongues: "If tongues today are unscriptural, why is there so much emphasis on this subject? There are several possible sources for tongues. (1) Divine. We have already ruled this out. (2) Satanic. (3) Psychological. (4) Fakery. We believe that every tongues experience today is one of the last three listed."

The [Foundation of European Apologetics](#) is even more blatant: "The Bible teaches that one should love God with all his intellect (Mat 22:37) and should renew (Rom 12:2) and develop his intellectual abilities (Eph 4:13; Heb 5:12; 2Pe 3:16-18.) Unfortunately many Christians do not develop the intellectual gifts, faculties they may possess, and do not study philosophy, history, ancient Greek and Hebrew... A lack of knowledge and logic can lead to serious heresies, to occultism indeed as in the case of glossolalia which we studied this morning. These consequences are

terrible and confirm the divine word 'My people is destroyed by lack of knowledge' (Hosea 4:6.) This is the more disastrous for the church that the New Testament forbids association with Christians who practice occultism.

Even worse, glossolalia is only one out of the many occult practices of the charismatic movement. And this movement grows to menacing proportions, at least comparable to the second century charismatic heresy, Montanism. The churches could then only stop it by officially condemning it and excommunicating the charismatics. Gérard Dagon, Président of the Fédération Evangélique de France, was recently courageous enough to take a stand against the charismatic movement. We can rejoice and praise God for this example of pure and upright faith. We can also pray and act so that an end may come to this heresy which leads astray many Christians deeper into occultism with each new wave."

Whatever the truth about *glossolalia* today, there are a few things of which we can be certain from Scripture:

1. The gift of *glossolalia* is one of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit.
2. Specific gifts of the Holy Spirit cannot be acquired through human effort, although there is nothing that suggests believers cannot ask for this, or any other, gift.
3. God is sovereign in the distribution of gifts.
4. *Glossolalia* is not an automatic gift—Paul clearly states that not everyone speaks in tongues (1 Corinthians 12:30).
5. *Glossolalia* does not make one more spiritual nor prove that one is more spiritual.
6. In any public setting, *glossolalia* must be accompanied by an interpreter and be done in an orderly fashion.
7. At some point the gift of *glossolalia* (as well as prophesy and knowledge) ceased or will cease.
8. The insistence that tongues have ceased and the insistence that tongues are a sign of being a believer are divisive claims that do not serve God's cause.

My own study leads me to believe the *glossolalia* was, indeed, a manifestation for the apostolic church. All three manifestations Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 13:8 (prophesy, tongues, and knowledge) played essential roles in the spreading the Gospel message in the early ekklesia. The messianic prophesies of Old Testament, quoted extensively by the New Testament writers, were not fully understood until Jesus came, but God gave special knowledge to these writers allowing them to understand those prophesies. He also gave them new prophesy, spoken by the Apostles and later written down by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Jude, and others. Finally, He gave them a special linguistic gift to allow people to hear the Gospel in their native tongues. Once the New Testament writings were completed, these gifts became less necessary.

Yet, I find the argument that "*the perfect*" (Greek, ***teleios***, having reached its end; complete, mature) refers to the Second Coming rather than the New Testament to be persuasive, so I cannot rule out the legitimacy of at least some contemporary examples of *glossolalia*. I would, however, distinguish between *glossolalia* and some more recent alleged manifestations of the Holy Spirit, such as the so-called "Toronto Blessing." The gift of *glossolalia* has a basis in Scripture and had a specific purpose—barking like a dog doesn't.

On the other hand, I firmly believe that what Paul referred to as *stenagmos* (groaning by the Holy Spirit in prayer), is very much alive. In connection with *stenagmos*, Paul wrote "*we do not know how to pray as we should*" (Romans 8:26). Surely that is as true now as it was then! Those who practice this kind of prayer (I wish I did), however, abuse it when they use it as a public show.

We would do well to remind ourselves again that Jesus calls us to “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind*” (Matthew 22:37). Those of us who overemphasize charismatic gifts may be guilty of neglecting mindful worship. Those of us who discredit the charismatic gifts, however, may be neglecting heart and soul. Some of the crowd on the Day of Pentecost misinterpreted the Apostles ecstatic behavior as drunkenness—perhaps the distrust some feel toward miraculous gifts is a similar reaction.

By the way, the “Fear Factor” contestant I spoke of earlier, whose utterances seemed incomprehensible, won the \$1,000,000 and praised Jesus. It’s hard for me to imagine that God would have a purpose in intervening in a TV reality show, particularly one as bizarre as “Fear Factor,” but draw your own conclusions.

Discussion

This personal experience came from one ET&N subscriber:

“I came to Christ wanting everything that He had to offer... That is why I lean toward Charismatic churches. I want all He has to Offer working in my life. After doing some reading and praying and getting an understanding about how to be baptized in the Holy Spirit with the gift of tongues I made up my mind to ask Him for it. Again, I laid down by the couch and prayed. After I prayed I continued to lie there praising and worshiping Him. I felt this rumble in my chest. It started out small and then worked its way up to my mouth and manifested itself into a language I did not understand. There was no stopping it. It was as if there was someone/something in me who had something to say and had been waiting for a very long time to say it. I sat up and the speaking continued. I had no control over it. Finally in about 20 minutes it stopped. I did the same thing in the same way the next night. Again I began speaking in tongues. It came easier that time but it was still uncontrollable. It only went on for a short time the 2nd time. Since then I pray in tongues whenever I wish to edify myself by speaking a heavenly language. Many times when I hear people speak in tongues I feel my heart leap and I involuntarily respond in kind as if in a prayerful response to them...”

A local brother and subscriber offered this feedback:

“Good article. I've always been taught that speaking in tongues is speaking in a language one did not study and was used to allow this small group of early Palestinian Christians to spread the gospel to all the world without concern for language. However, the reference to the need for an interpreter in 1 Corinthians 14 seems to complicate this argument.

I guess I've always wondered just what tongues were that needed interpretation. Your speculation about the language of Eden is interesting. This is a topic I honestly haven't spent much time considering, but I've always wondered just exactly what was being said when people were speaking in tongues. The Acts 2 example is the only real specification of the practice, but that instance didn't need an interpreter and was more a function of hearing than speaking.

Still a mystery to me I guess, and I'm afraid your article just raised more questions for me than answers. It seems I have some studying to do as a result of your writing (again).”

DS: Tongues are still largely a mystery to me too. Maybe that’s the way God wants them to be.

From a Kansas subscriber:

“If I understand it right, one of the major tenets of Holiness/Pentecostal theology is that sanctification is a separate work of the Holy Spirit apart from conversion, and a person that has not received some miraculous manifestation of the Spirit has not been sanctified (or in some cases, is not saved). If there are real instances of glossolalia (I have neither seen nor heard of any that fall in line with scripture) then why not the other more sensational or profitable gifts? Why not prophecy, which Paul extols as one of the greatest gifts? Why not healing and the working of miracles? No, the one so-called "gift" that many have parked on is speaking in tongues. It is the one "gift" that is next to impossible to prove as authentic. Not so with the working of miracles (when they are accomplished in the manner of Jesus and the Apostles).”

DS: there are certainly those who suggest prophecy, healing, and miracle-working are, in fact, still active today. Personally, I'd love to witness just one of these—not to confirm belief (although it certainly wouldn't hurt), but just to put to rest doubts about the end of such signs.

At the same time, this subscriber is right that *glossolalia* can be faked, but then so can faith, repentance, confession, and even baptism. Jesus had a name for fakers—hypocrites, which literally meant an act and from which the English word hypocrite derives. While we are to watch out for fakers, ultimately I'll trust God to sort them out.

From a Texas subscriber:

"I appreciate this newsletter and particularly this last one. Concerning 1 Corinthians 13:8, I have heard it emphatically stated that this verse decisively shows that tongues no longer exist. That is simply not what the Bible says there. The irony to me on this is that folks who care deeply about what the Bible says will not back away from that position, and I'm not sure why. As you stated, Paul clearly minimized glossolalia, and I am more comfortable staying with that as a Biblical position. I believe that to take the emphatic position that glossolalia does not exist anymore is to put God in a box. It is God's gift, and if used in this century for His purposes, then Glory be to God!"

From a sister:

"Reading your article on speaking in tongues was interesting and helps me to keep an open mind on the topic."

DS: In the past, I have received some comments suggesting that open-mindedness is not a Christian virtue, using verses such as Philippians 1:27 as proof that we are all to think alike. Of course, such people usually believe the "one mind" Paul advocates is theirs. The open-mindedness I would advocate is that which recognizes each of us understands only partially now (see 1 Corinthians 13:12) and that we can always learn from others who genuinely love Jesus and seek to serve Him.

NEXT ISSUE: Disasters

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