

TONGUES OF HEAVEN AND EARTH: THE VARIETIES OF GLOSSOLALIC INTERPRETATION

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Abstract: Glossolalia, one of the most researched phenomena of the Christian world, can be viewed from three basic perspectives: (1) as a normal expression of known languages, but improper for the occasion, violating the accepted diglossia (naturalistic model), (2) as a supernatural expression of unlearned human languages (miraculous model), and (3) as an enthusiastic expression of inarticulate speech (ecstatic model). The biblical pattern seems to fit better into the miraculous model, but could include elements of the ecstatic model. For both Luke and Paul, the gift of tongues is an inspired intelligible utterance with multiple purposes, revelational/doxological content, and one source/origin (the Spirit). After decades of research, the ambiguity of this phenomenon still remains. However, a few provisional “certainties” can be outlined: (1) the understanding of glossolalia is highly dependent on one’s theological presuppositions; (2) the glossolalic phenomenon is not peculiar to Christian charismatism; (3) glossolalia has multiple possible sources; (4) modern glossolalia can be identified with a learned behavior and bear no intelligible content; (5) glossolalia has a communitarian dimension; (6) glossolalia implies an altered state of consciousness;

(7) current psychological research on glossolalia seems more objective; (8) glossolalia should not be taken as a sign of orthodoxy or higher spiritual status; (10) glossolalia in Christian settings should have a minimum of correspondence to the New Testament phenomenon.

Keywords: glossolalia, speaking in tongues, diglossia, gift, sign, interpretation of tongues, Holy Spirit.

Línguas do Céu e da Terra: a variedade de interpretações da glossolalia

Resumo: A glossolalia, um dos fenômenos mais pesquisados do mundo cristão, pode ser vista a partir de três perspectivas básicas: (1) como uma expressão normal de línguas conhecidas, mas impróprias para a ocasião, violando a diglossia estabelecida (modelo naturalístico), (2) como uma expressão sobrenatural de línguas humanas não aprendidas (modelo miraculoso) e (3) como uma expressão entusiástica de fala inarticulada (modelo extático). O padrão bíblico parece se encaixar melhor com o modelo miraculoso, mas pode incluir elementos do modelo extático. Para Lucas e Paulo, o dom de línguas é uma elocução inspirada e inteligível, com múltiplos propósitos, conteúdo revelacional/doxológico e uma fonte/origem (o Espírito). Após décadas de pesquisa, o fenômeno continua ambíguo, mas algumas “certezas” provisórias podem ser esboçadas: (1) a compreensão da glossolalia depende das pressuposições teológicas da pessoa; (2) o fenômeno glossolálico não é peculiar ao carismatismo cristão; (3) a glossolalia pode ter múltiplas fontes; (4) a glossolalia moderna pode ser identificada com um comportamento aprendido e não apresenta conteúdo inteligível; (5) a glossolalia tem uma dimensão comunitária; (6) a glossolalia implica um estado alterado de consciência; (7) a pesquisa atual sobre a glossolalia parece ser mais objetiva; (8) a glossolalia não deve ser considerada um sinal de ortodoxia ou status espiritual mais elevado; (10) a glossolalia no ambiente cristão deve ter um mínimo de correspondência com o fenômeno descrito no Novo Testamento.

Palavras-chave: glossolalia, falar em línguas, diglossia, dom, sinal, interpretação de línguas, Espírito Santo.

Introduction

Speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, is one of the most controversial and studied gifts in the recent history of Christian scholarship.¹ Although there are scores of studies on the subject,² I would like to highlight three landmarks in the field: *Glossolalia*, released in 1985 by H. Newton Malony and A. Adams Lovekin, which is the most comprehensive/authoritative overview from a social and behavioral perspective;³ *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment*, authored in 1997 by Christopher Forbes, which is perhaps the best approach to inspired speech available;⁴ and *Speaking in Tongues*, recently edited by Mark J. Cartledge, which provides a useful multi-disciplinary analysis of the topic.⁵

Not surprisingly, speaking in tongues has challenged theologians and other scholars for a long time. C. S. Lewis confessed that glossolalia was “a stumbling-block” and “an embarrassing phenomenon” to him.⁶ Long ago, Henry Barclay Swete said: “There is no historical statement in the New Testament which is more difficult to interpret than St Luke’s account of the Pentecostal gift of tongues.”⁷ Perhaps only the Pauline theological statements about the same gift surpass Luke’s account in mystery.

1. Models of interpretation

What was the linguistic nature of this New Testament phenomenon? Is the biblical gift identical to the phenomenon known today as glossolalia? If the phenomena are different, how should one explain glossolalia?

To begin with a working definition, the biblical gift of tongues is a special ability that God gives to some believers to express potentially intelligible utterances to communicate the gospel, praise God, and/or attest God’s presence. Examples include the apostles (Acts 2:4), the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48), a group of believers from Ephesus (Acts 19:6), the Corinthians (1 Cor 14:26), and Paul (1 Cor 14:18).

The Greek expression *glossa lalein* (literally, “to speak in tongues”) appears in five New Testament passages.⁸ Considering all references or allusions, there is a total of approximately 35 instances in the New Testament, with predominance in Pauline literature. The simpler expression *glossa lalein* possibly is an ellipse or abbreviation of the more original formula *heterais glossais laleo* (Acts 2:4) or *heteroglossais laleo*.⁹ As Roy Harrisville underlines, perhaps “by the time Paul and the author of Acts had put pen to paper the terms had become more or less fixed, a possibility which would also explain the combination of *glossa* with *lalein*, but never with *legein*.”¹⁰

A plethora of commentary interpretations have been offered for the biblical gift of tongues.¹¹ The options include tongues as an enthusiastic expression in native languages improper for a given setting, and against collective expectation, in a context of diglossia;¹² the ability to speak real unlearned languages (xenolalia or xenoglossia);¹³ angelic speech;¹⁴ “a kind of structured or ordered babbling”;¹⁵ complex speech patterns that “may bear all kinds of cognitive information in some coded array”;¹⁶ “a piece without fragments from known human languages, having linguistic deviations from patterns common to human languages, yet being indistinguishable by a naïve listener from a foreign language”;¹⁷ “language of the unconscious, but language capable of becoming conscious”;¹⁸ “prayer without concepts, prayer at a deep, noncognitive level”;¹⁹ an eschatological Spirit-inspired “groaning,” that is, a free, transcendent, and “unclassifiable” response to the free, transcendent, and “unclassifiable” Spirit of God;²⁰ a “discourse of resistance,” which resists current philosophical categories and defies the powers of the world, a kind of linguistic surrealism, a symbol/indicator of a divine reality.²¹

All these options may be simplified into three: (1) known languages improper for the occasion (naturalistic model), (2) previously unlearned human languages (miraculous model), and (3) inarticulate speech (ecstatic model). Another possibility is that Luke understood the phenomenon as intelligible, while Paul viewed it as unintelligible.

Supporters of the naturalistic model argue that the disciples spoke in Aramaic and Greek in a context of worship (the feast of Pentecost), so violating the Jewish diglossia. In plain terms, diglossia is a kind of bilingualism with a “high” language for formal use and a “low” language for day-to-day talks.^{[22](#)} In the context of our study, this concept means that Hebrew was an upper or H language, proper for ceremony, liturgy, and learning (or the “holy language” of the temple), in the same sense that Latin once was the language of the Catholic liturgy. Aramaic and Greek were lower or L languages, everyday vernacular. Therefore, from a *gentile understanding*, we think that the disciples spoke in the languages of several nations; but in fact, from a *Jewish understanding*, they spoke in “other tongues” (Acts 2:4) than Hebrew.

This view assumes that Acts 2:9-11 presents a list of nations (geographical areas), not of languages, and that there was a small linguistic diversity among the first-century Jews of the Diaspora. The Septuagint would be just one evidence that most scattered Jews spoke Greek. Besides, Luke includes “Judea” in the list. So, why a language miracle? On the other hand, it is argued, the believers of Corinth spoke remote native languages, without translation, in the worship setting, violating the Greek as *lingua franca*, which everyone knew.^{[23](#)}

Another interpretation related to diglossia has been recently offered by William Harmening, an instructor of psychology and criminal law at Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield, Illinois.^{[24](#)} Citing Jewish sources, including the Talmud, he argues that Hebrew was seen by the Jews as the language of God and the angels. Therefore, its use in the worship environment was heavily regulated. The meturgeman, or interpreter, was a key element in the liturgy of the synagogue because he “translated”/interpreted into the mother tongue of the assembly what was read from the scrolls in Hebrew, the holy tongue. The Christian synagogue/church followed the basic liturgy of the Jewish synagogue, but in Corinth there were some deviations.^{[25](#)}

According to Harmening, the linguistic phenomena described in Acts and 1 Corinthians are radically different. At Pentecost, in parallel with the giving of the Torah at the Sinai, the disciples were given the miraculous power to speak real unlearned languages, in order to start the Christian church. In Corinth, the Christian Jews, following the cultic traditions of the synagogue, were trying to impose a ritualistic use of the holy language (Hebrew) into the Christian assembly. Paul accepts the use of the Jewish tradition, but devalues the effectiveness of an enthusiastic recitation of the Scripture in the sacred tongue, especially when used without the help of a gifted interpreter and in a non-ordered way.

After quoting a statement by John Lightfoot (1602-1675) that seems to validate his view,²⁶ Harmening observes that “the use of Hebrew would have been confusing to the Gentile population in the Church who neither understood the language nor had any tradition requiring its use, thus resulting in the problems Paul addresses in his epistle.” Therefore, Paul “de-ritualizes the use of Hebrew and pulls away from using the language solely for the sake of fulfilling a synagogue requirement.”²⁷

This naturalistic interpretation is ingenious, but does not explain satisfactorily all facts stated in the text. For example, in Acts 2:6-12, people from many places wonder how Galileans could speak in their (the hearers’) own languages. It seems that their sense of wonder did not have to do only with the boldness of the apostles in speaking the things of God in common language (rather than Hebrew, the holy language), but with a much more spectacular phenomenon, namely, a linguistic miracle. Anyway, it is a welcome different exploration.

Conservative Protestant theologians tend to favor the option 2 above (the miraculous model).²⁸ Most Adventist theologians also support the miraculous model (so Ellen White,²⁹ Gerhard Hasel [see below], Morris Venden,³⁰ and George Rice³¹), but there are defenders of some version of the ecstatic model (so William Richardson [see below] and Ivan Blazen³²). The authors of the *Seventh-day Adventist Commentary* support the

miraculous model for the phenomenon of Acts, but progressively work with both possibilities (the miraculous and the ecstatic models) for the Corinthian phenomenon.³³

The early Pentecostals started by explaining their glossolalic experience as a miraculous expression of previously unlearned languages (xenolalia), granted by God for the evangelization of foreign peoples, but linguistic counter-evidence made them to abandon this explanation in favor of the option 3 (ecstatic model).³⁴ Sophisticated research made an impossible shift possible. Technology sometimes changes theology! So, according to the current mainstream Pentecostal/charismatic interpretation, instead of a missiological gift, glossolalia is an ineffable gift for worship or private edification. In some way, the focus has been changed from the earth to heaven.

As James Smith puts it, “in the popular imagination, glossolalia is often thought to be a quintessentially unmediated, divinely given, ecstatic discourse which bypasses the conditions of interpretation – a kind of pure conduit from God, without the static or supposed distortion of semiotic mediation.”³⁵ Accordingly, while people do not understand the grammar of the s/Spirit, God does.

John Bertone, who sees a reference to glossolalic utterance in Romans 8:26, even for “the unlikelihood of silent prayer in antiquity” (people used to pray aloud), comments: “Glossolalic speech is the fundamental prerogative of the children of God exercising their right of expression through prayer; it is an acknowledgment of their insufficiencies and need for reliance upon God, who in turn understands their situation and meets their need by praying with them and for them.”³⁶ In this experience, the believer is intimately aligned with God and God is emotionally aligned with the believer.

This theology is beautiful. However, does the ecstatic view fit the biblical portrayal of glossolalia? For a tentative answer, see the assessment below. A key point to make here is that the apostle Paul clearly links tongues with interpretation, aiming at communication between utterer and listener.

Richardson, in consonance with many modern charismatic scholars, sees a difference between the gift in Acts and the gift in Corinth. In Pentecost, according to him, the gift was unlearned foreign language, given with two purposes: (1) “to enable the apostles to communicate in various dialects” and (2) “to grab the attention of the crowds and thereby add credence and credibility to the words of the apostles.”³⁷ In Corinth, the gift was a kind of holy enthusiasm, a euphoric experience, that is, unintelligible speech or ecstatic utterance.³⁸ He concludes:

Corinthian glossolalia, the charism that Paul included in his list of gifts, and that is nearly hidden behind all the abuses, began as a genuine, personal experience of prayer and praise, characterized by surrender of the human spirit to the divine Spirit. The result was an emotional feeling difficult to put into words. Occasionally, however, it burst forth in rapturous vocalizing, not unlike continuous expressions of “hallelujah,” which would need “interpretation” before anyone else could fully benefit from the reasons behind such enthusiasm.³⁹

Richardson’s reconstruction of Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 14 has plausibility, if we exegete just the Pauline text. Any Adventist with a charismatic taste certainly will feel inclined to appreciate his openness and effort to make sense of such a difficult passage. The problem is that there are other variants involved.

From a broader context, and working mainly with linguistic data, Hasel also makes a convincing case that the gift in both Acts and 1 Corinthians refers to unlearned foreign languages. He argues that in the New Testament the Greek term *glossa* (“tongues”) means either the physical organ of speech or languages; that “there is full and complete identity of language in every New Testament passage that treats the subject of ‘speaking in tongues’”; that the early church fathers and the majority of ancient scholars supported the tongues-as-foreign-language view, differently from modern scholars, which suggests a reading back into the New Testament; and that there is no use of the

expression *glossa lalein* (“to speak in tongues”) “in non-biblical Greek texts to mean glossolalia in the sense of unintelligible speech.” Therefore, Hasel concludes, there is just one gift of tongues in the entire New Testament, “which is supported by the same terminology, the context of the Holy Spirit’s work, and the uniqueness of early Christian tongues-speaking,” and such gift is “non-ecstatic in nature.”⁴⁰ Any conservative Adventist will appreciate Hasel’s enterprise.

How should one situate oneself between these two Adventist scholars of the same school (Andrews University) holding opposing views? Assuming the risk of dissatisfying both parties, I will suggest that these views are not totally irreconcilable. Is it not possible to speak a real language through the Spirit and at the same time experience an overflow of enthusiasm or some degree of dissociation? Let us look for a biblical rationale.

2. Biblical perspectives

In Acts, Luke seems to make a deliberate effort⁴¹ to present the gift of tongues as unlearned foreign languages, but he also allows for an emotional accompaniment. First, the sacred historian declares that the Spirit “enabled” the disciples “to speak in other tongues” (2:4), which suggests a gift whose source lies not merely on human psychology. If their utterance were common or caused through some trance-inducing process, it would be difficult to explain the astonishing perceived novelty.

Then, using a hyperbole, Luke states that in Jerusalem there were Jews from “every nation under heaven” (vs. 5), a preparatory description for what he will say. In vs. 6, he adds that each one in the international and bewildered crowd heard the disciples speaking in his “own language” (*idia dialekto*). Here Luke seems to emphasize again the specificity and wideness of the phenomenon. The question of the amazed visitors whether the speakers were not all “Galileans” (vs. 7) reinforces the linguistic nature of the phenomenon.

To highlight his point, Luke says that the listeners wondered how each one was hearing “in his own native language” (vs. 8). This Lukan statement has been used to interpret the tongues at Pentecost as a miracle of hearing (akolalia). Luke Timothy Johnson and Jenny Everts are modern interpreters, among others, who support this view.⁴² Yet, the whole context, particularly vs. 4, seems to dismiss this interpretation.

Sharpening the focus, Luke then cites a list of countries and peoples that “closely resembles that of the regions and peoples of the Persian Empire according to the inscription made by Darius I at Behistun.”⁴³ Luke describes an “assembly of Jews in Jerusalem regarded as representing ‘every nation under heaven,’ but named for the dominions of the King of Persia,” perhaps in order to “represent, not the Dispersion, but the Return of the scattered people of God.”⁴⁴

If this hypothesis is correct, then the so divulged idea that the list of nations in Acts represents a reversal of the scattering in the episode of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-8) loses force. I am not particularly impressed with the Babel case. In spite of the links between Genesis 11 and Acts 2 suggested by J. G. Davies and others,⁴⁵ I find Babel a little bit out of context in the account of Pentecost. Of course, it is possible to elaborate a theological contrast/connection between Babel and Pentecost, as Frank Macchia does so well.⁴⁶ However, such construal is more theological than exegetical. In this sense, while Babel was an arrogant, defiant, idolatrous, monolithic, homogeneous, oppressive, excluding, and failed experiment, Pentecost was a humble, submissive, worshipful, pluralistic, unifying, liberating, embracing, and successful event.⁴⁷

I see more plausibility in a connection between the giving of the law to Israel at the Sinai and the internalization of the law by the new international Israel at Pentecost. I will not discuss the evidences here, but they are strong.⁴⁸ “Patterned by the first Pentecost, when God gave the law on Mount Sinai, the antitypical Pentecost also is marked by a scenario of fire, earthquake, and wind.”⁴⁹ Luke is a Jew/Christian universalizing author.

As such, he focuses on the Jews' response to Christ, especially in the first chapters of Acts, as well as on the acceptance of the Gentiles into the covenant. He democratizes the identity of God's people and the experiences of the Spirit, who makes possible the obedience to the law.

Finally, in the sequence of Acts 2, Luke observes that the phenomenon was perceived by some as a declaration of "the wonders of God," and compared by others to drunkenness, although none knew exactly its meaning (vss. 11-13). This suggests that, even being an inspired utterance in foreign languages, the phenomenon may have involved a high level of emotion.

The other two occurrences of tongues in Acts, although not marked by external phenomena (fire, wind, earthquake), were patterned by that of Pentecost (10:44-47 [cf. 15:8]; 19:6), probably with a similar emotional involvement (note the praise in 10:46), except that in Ephesus the believers also "prophesied" (19:6). If the phenomena in Acts 10 were different from those of Pentecost, Peter probably would not have considered them as a proof of the acceptance of the Gentiles by God.

Accepting the phenomenon in Acts as foreign languages, as the natural reading suggests⁵⁰ and the early Christian writers seem to have understood it,⁵¹ what are we to do with the phenomenon in Corinth? Are both the same? Must we study them separately? Is it legitimate to use the clearer text of Acts to illuminate the more obscure text of Corinthians?

First of all, one thing seems logical: if we are to use any source to clarify or establish the meaning of tongues in Corinth, the best option is a sacred source that shares some kind of identity in terms of phenomenon, community, authorship, and interpretation. Jewish people in the first century, as a rule, were zealous for their uniqueness. Even a cosmopolitan Paul, with his contextualizing impetus, hardly would violate his religious-ethnic background, unless directly convinced by God.⁵²

Most scholars assume that the Corinthian phenomenon had counterparts in the Greco-Roman environment.⁵³ Nils I. J. Engelsen, in his research of ancient Greek and Hebrew sources, concludes that similar phenomena were known outside the Christian circles, but the technical terms *glossa* or *glossais lalein* do not appear in pre-Christian literature because automatic/inarticulate speech was “envisioned as an inherent feature of (ecstatic) prophetic speech,” that is, the phenomenon was considered part of divination or prophecy. He writes: “The ecstatic phenomena in Corinth are not as such distinctively Christian, but are pan-human. Still there might be essential differences because the faith which creates them gives to them its own motivation and intellectual frame of reference.”⁵⁴ However, Christopher Forbes has seriously challenged this consensus, arguing that the Christian phenomenon was unique.⁵⁵ T. M. Crone also has shown the improbability of such alleged parallels.⁵⁶ More recently, Gerald Hovenden came to a similar conclusion.⁵⁷

The phenomenon of tongues in Corinth seems to have been the specific catalyzer of the whole discussion about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14, although the overarching problem was perhaps of an eschatological nature. The Corinthians apparently had an “overrealized” eschatology, as defended by Anthony Thiselton and others.⁵⁸ They probably were influenced in their overall concept of spirituality by their social context.

Corinth, capital of the Roman province of Achaia, was proverbial by its sexual license. Destroyed in 146 B.C. and rebuilt in 44 or 46 B.C. by order of Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.), it was a sparkling metropolis (for that time) and a competitive center for trade.⁵⁹ Temples dedicated to Aphrodite (goddess of love, beauty, and fertility; patroness of the sacred prostitutes), Asklepios (god of healing), and Apollo (god of prophecy), among other deities, punctuated the landscape of the city. Inserted in an honor-shame oriented world, the Corinthians apparently used a series of means to achieve high social status. “Corinth was a city where public boasting and self-promotion had become an art form,” says Witherington.⁶⁰ Therefore, reflecting the larger society and a pagan background,

the church of Corinth had a series of doctrinal, ethical, and spiritual problems.

For the Corinthians, the gift of tongues probably was a “status indicator.”⁶¹ However, the specific status conferred by tongue-speaking may have had an internal, Jewish-Christian origin or influence. Pentecost, showing dramatic phenomena, involving apostolic leadership, and receiving eschatological interpretation, must have had a great impact on the early church.⁶² Therefore, the gift of tongues, regarded as an emblematic sign of the manifestation of the Spirit, must have incited a showy desire in Corinth—a phenomenon not without parallel in the twenty-first century.

To put it in fewer words, the believers of Corinth received the gift of tongues from their new Jewish-Christian community, but brought from their Hellenistic background a taste and/or motivation to use that gift as a mark of status. While the practice of tongues was typically Christian, the exaggerated elitism conferred on it in Corinth was typically pagan—not because the pagans necessarily had a similar phenomenon, but because the believers of Corinth, like their pagan co-citizens, were immature and valued flashy spirituality.

With pastoral sensitivity, Paul tries to create a more balanced view by (1) relativizing the gift of tongues as just one gift among many others (chapter 12); (2) encouraging love as the supreme way of the life controlled by the Spirit and the real measure of all gifts (chapter 13); and (3) stressing the intelligibility of tongues and underscoring the utilitarian primacy of prophecy over tongues (chapter 14).

Paul’s arguments about tongues in 1 Corinthians may be interpreted in harmony with the Lukan perspective. One may argue that evidence is pointing in another direction. This is not necessarily the case. To begin with, Paul may envisage tongues as a complex multiform phenomenon.⁶³ “It is possible that there was a continuum of experiences that moved from known human languages on one end of the spectrum, through several intermediate categories of language structure, to unintelligible

vocalizations on the other end.”[64](#) Let us examine some data.

In 13:1, Paul says hypothetically that if he spoke “in the tongues of men and of angels,” but had not love, this ability would be meaningless. Here the apostle probably is not identifying the gift of tongues as tongues of angels. “This type of conditional clause in the Greek language is one that does not speak about reality,” observes Hasel. “Paul seems to say with hyperbole that if all linguistic possibilities, including angelic speech, were at his disposal and yet he lacked love, it would mean nothing.”[65](#)

In 14:2, Paul says that “anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God,” and “utters mysteries with his spirit.” An alternative translation for this last clause is “speaking mysteries in the Spirit” (RSV). This solution seems better, for the word “his” is not in the original Greek text. The word “mysteries” may be taken in the “normal” Pauline usage, as something once hidden but now revealed by God, or as a contrast to the revelation of prophecy. For Richardson, this verse says that the gift of tongues “wasn’t a medium of communication with other humans but rather a medium of communication with God”; or, in other words, “the tongues experience had a vertical dimension but not a horizontal one.”[66](#) For Hasel, the mystery is due to the absence of people who understand the foreign language spoken.[67](#) John Baldwin thinks Hasel’s point of view is favored over that of Richardson.[68](#)

Tongues really have a vertical dimension, but Paul is trying to restore the horizontal one. Prophecy, by its nature, is a vertical phenomenon, which becomes horizontal at the moment of communication to other humans. That is, it comes from God to the prophet and goes to the listeners in an intelligible way. Tongues, by their nature, are a vertical phenomenon, which only become horizontal when interpreted. That is, tongues come from God to the speaker, go back to God in form of praise, return to the interpreter, and then reach the audience as an intelligible message.[69](#) In Corinth, where the phenomenon had become an end in itself, at least for a group, the last part of the process was lacking. Yet, with their immature or childish behavior (vs. 20), the

Corinthians continued to value tongues above other gifts, love, and community.

With a series of successive remarks in 1 Cor 14, especially in vss. 1-19, Paul seems engaged in making clear that tongues must be an intelligible phenomenon. To achieve this goal, he establishes two practical conditions: (1) the orderly utterance in the public worship of up to three speakers, one at a time, and (2) followed by interpretation (vs. 27). Therefore, tongues could be a form of praise or prayer with spiritual profit for the tongues-speaker (vss. 14-17), but was unprofitable (or, worse, harmful) for the community, leading unbelievers to charge the church with madness (vs. 23). If outsiders came into their gathering, they would consider them crazy, or mad, or possessed, no matter the kind of impression. In this case, tongues would have a negative evangelistic impact.⁷⁰ At least, this gift was an insufficient evangelistic tool.

At one level, the Corinthians had misunderstood the primary purpose of tongues, and accordingly were misusing the gift.⁷¹ The basic functions/purposes of tongues apparently are to magnify God through inspired prayer, to be (historically) a sign to unbelievers of a new international covenant, and to reveal inspired content. In Corinth, these purposes were incomplete. To meet their elitist/spiritualizing agenda, the Corinthians were extolling a lesser function of tongues to the detriment of its higher function. With this, we come to the question of tongues as a sign.

3. Tongues as a sign

In 1 Corinthians 14:21, Paul, with a rabbinical taste for midrashic interpretation⁷² and apostolical authority to apply Old Testament passages to new contexts, appeals to Isaiah 28:11, 12 (echoing the covenantal curse of Deuteronomy 28:49-50) in order to make his point that tongues, especially uninterpreted, are not designed to dominate the corporate worship. He says that tongues are a sign for unbelievers. In what sense are tongues a sign? There are multiple interpretations.⁷³

In my view, at Pentecost, in a Jewish context, tongues were implicitly (1) a sign of judgment for the unbelieving Israel, indicating that the kingdom was being given to people of all nations; (2) a sign of opportunity to the world, attesting that Jesus was the Messiah, now enthroned in heaven, and that God was speaking through the apostles; and (3) a sign of blessing for the church, evidencing that God was empowering the believers to extol God's salvation and to preach Christ.⁷⁴ In other words, tongues as witnessed in its historical setting, outside the worship space, were a sign, either negative or positive, primarily for virtual "unbelieving" believers (Jews), secondarily for potential "believing" unbelievers (Jews and/or Gentiles), and tertiarily for real "believing" believers (followers).

Independently, Blaine Charette also has advanced the argument that "the Pentecost language event," as an eschatological event centered in Jesus, signals at the same time blessing (for the obedient, those who accept God's salvation) and judgment (for the disobedient, those who refuse to accept God's offer). The aspect of judgment is implied in Luke's reference to "tongues as of fire" (Acts 2:3) in the Pentecost narrative.⁷⁵

But what kind of sign were tongues in Corinth, in a Gentile context? It is possible that Paul, in order to restrict the Corinthians, and having their "own point of view in mind"⁷⁶ (to correct it), was remitting them to the primary historical roles of tongues at Pentecost.⁷⁷ Paul seems to be saying: "God used tongues in a context of attestation of his new people before unbelievers; now you are using tongues in a context of exhibition before believers." In some way, the remembrance of tongues as a sign for unbelievers, parallel to (or contradistinct of) prophecy as a sign for believers, was just one more theological/rhetorical device in the Pauline repertoire to make the triple point that the believers of Corinth should have a more realistic view of tongues, that prophecy is more profitable than tongues, and that public worship should be developed in an intelligible/orderly/edifying way.⁷⁸

There are, however, other plausible solutions. One is offered by Joop Smit, who

considers irrelevant the original context of the quotation of Isaiah, and applies it “not to the glossolalists among the believers, but to the ecstatic speakers, present everywhere in the Hellenistic surroundings.” The correct rendition of vs. 22 in the form of a definition, in this case, would be: “So the tongues, regarded as a sign of recognition, are not proper to the believers, but to the unbelievers.” Smit concludes: “The thesis is simple: faced with ecstatic speakers the ordinary observer does not think of believers, but of unbelievers.”⁷⁹ A problem with this hypothesis is that it assumes (1) the Corinthian phenomenon had a Hellenistic background and (2) a highly negative view of tongues, which seems to go beyond Paul’s appraisal of the gift.

Another possible solution is presented by Robert Gladstone, who, promising to tie together all strands of the text, suggests this alternative translation to vs. 22: “Therefore tongues are a sign, not resulting in believers, but resulting in unbelievers; But prophecy [is a sign], not resulting in unbelievers, but resulting in believers.” With their “infatuation with tongues,” the Corinthians thought this gift would impress and convert unbelievers, but Paul warns them that they were not truly considering the perspective of the outsiders.⁸⁰

More recently, Stephen Chester wrote a fine article, trying to solve the puzzle of 1 Corinthians 14:23 by ascribing a positive reaction to the outsider (a non-expert) in face of the glossolalic manifestation. For him, the verb *maineste*—traditionally understood in a negative sense and diversely translated as “you are mad” (JB, KJV, REB, RSV), “you are out of your mind” (NRSV, NVI), “you are crazy” (GNB)—should be understood in a positive sense and is best translated as “you are inspired.” Tongues would be “a sign for unbelievers in the straightforward sense that they alert the outsider to the presence of divine activity among the Corinthian believers.” Instead of alienation or repulsion, the exclamation of the outsider would be recognition of “divine madness” among the Corinthians.⁸¹

Chester defends that Paul’s citation of Isaiah 28:11-12 (in 1 Corinthians 14:21) possibly

applies either to the outsiders or to the insiders. In the first case, Paul's statement in 14:22 that tongues are a sign for "unbelievers" would mean that tongues indicate divine presence to the outsiders, but do not cause their conversion. Therefore, tongues are in fact a sign, "but not a sufficient one." In the second case, Paul's statement would mean that the Corinthians were being childish for valuing tongues over prophecy, and (as in Isaiah 28) "God could then only speak" to them "using the babble of baby talk" (of uninterpreted tongues).⁸² No doubt, Chester's hypothesis deserves serious attention.

No matter one's view of Paul's statement about sign, one has to recognize that the apostle emphasizes the importance of interpretation and intelligibility. If we accept that the gift of tongues was a supernatural ability to speak in foreign unlearned languages during a somewhat ecstatic state, what can we say about the gift of interpreting tongues?

One's understanding of the "interpretation of tongues" (*hermeneia glosson*) in 1 Corinthians (12, 14) depends on one's understanding of the term "tongues." What one thinks of the nature of the gift of tongues will determine what one thinks the gift of interpretation of tongues is. There are two basic interpretations: (1) to translate the inspired content to another language and (2) to put the unintelligent glossolalia into intelligible words or to bring it to articulate expression.⁸³ Although both views are possible, the "normal" use of the verbs *hermeneuo* and *dihermeneuo* is in the linguistic sense of translation or interpretation.⁸⁴

Based on this, I would say that the gift of tongues-interpretation is a special ability that God gives to some believers to make sense in vernacular language of the content of inspired speech given through the gift of tongues. Although there are no biblical specific examples of tongues-interpreters, the gift certainly was known.⁸⁵

[4. The assessment of glossolalia](#)

So far, the general conclusion is that for both Luke and Paul the gift of tongues an inspired intelligible utterance with multiple purposes, revelational/doxological content, and one source/origin (the Spirit). It is possible, as Forbes argues, that Luke, unlike Paul, “conceives of glossolalia as a subspecies within the broader category of ‘prophecy,’ rather than as a separate, though related, phenomenon.”⁸⁶ Yet both are speaking of the same phenomenon, although in diverse contexts, and with different purposes.

Given this fact, what could we say about modern glossolalia? After decades of research, the ambiguity of this phenomenon still remains. However, a few provisional “certainties” can be outlined.

First, Christian understanding of glossolalia is highly dependent on one’s theological presuppositions. Traditional Protestant theologians tend to see the biblical phenomenon as real languages and the modern phenomenon as gibberish,⁸⁷ which causes them to oppose the modern experience. Pentecostal/charismatic theologians tend to see both Corinthian and contemporary phenomena as unintelligible utterances.

Second, the glossolalic phenomenon is not peculiar to, or exclusive of, Pentecostalism/charismatism. Anthropologist L. Carlyle May documented cases among several twentieth-century non-Christian cultures.⁸⁸ The respected Pentecostal scholar Russell Splitter recognizes: “Whatever its origin, glossolalia is a human phenomenon, not limited to Christianity nor even to religious behavior.”⁸⁹ Splitter mentions dramatic glossolalia, when actors, using their talents in television comedies, “spontaneously initiate a language, then put the punch line in the vernacular”; spiritualistic glossolalia, practiced by mediums and firstly studied by psychologists; pathological glossolalia, which “result of such causes as organic neurological damage, effects of drugs, or psychotic disorders”; and pagan glossolalia, both ancient and modern.⁹⁰ For someone concerned with biblical identity, this fact should suggest caution.

Third, glossolalia has three possible sources: (1) the Holy Spirit (divine origin), (2) the speakers (human origin), or (3) Satan (demonic origin).⁹¹ Options 2 and 3 certainly could be mixed. The question is: Can options 1 and 2 be mixed likewise? Might the Holy Spirit take a human-initiated phenomenon and transform it into a gift of praise to God? Biblically, no one can dare to say with assurance “yes” or “no,” although in some way every charismatic phenomenon is a confluence of divine and human elements.

Fourth, modern glossolalia, rightly or wrongly associated with the biblical gift of tongues,⁹² has been almost beyond doubt identified with a learned behavior,⁹³ bearing no intelligible or meaningful content. According to Malony and Lovekin, “it can with certainty be stated that there has been little or no confirmation of the claims that glossolalists have spoken in modern languages currently being spoken.”⁹⁴ Noted linguists have pointed out that glossolalia lacks the basic linguistic features. William Samarin writes: “When the full apparatus of linguistic science comes to bear on glossolalia, this turns out to be only a facade of language—although at times a very good one indeed.”⁹⁵ Glossolalics “have not tried to produce lexicons, nor do they feel a need to do so”; “they do not know what their speeches mean, and they trust God to interpret the meaning through the insight He gives to another person.”⁹⁶

Fifth, glossolalia has a communitarian dimension. “Public religious glossolalia typically occurs in an environment of shared expectations. The presence of God is assumed, and the power of the Holy Spirit to speak through individuals is taken for granted.” Yet, it must be noted, there are “individual differences among those who desire to become glossolalic”; not all who seek to speak in tongues receive this ability, probably due to personality traits.⁹⁷ That the cultural environment provides the socio-religious-psychological “rules” for the glossolalic experience seems beyond doubt.

Sixth, glossolalia implies an extraordinary or altered state of consciousness,⁹⁸ which may have diverse psychological/anthropological interpretations. Felicitas Goodman, noted for her cross-cultural research, has assumed that glossolalia involves a complex

state of trance.⁹⁹ According to Malony and Lovekin, *trance* (“the phenomenon observed from the outside,” “defined observationally”) and *possession* (“the experience reported from the inside,” “typically defined personally and culturally”) are the two words that have been applied to the glossolalic state.¹⁰⁰ John Kildahl sees a similarity between glossolalia and hypnosis in that either experience can be induced by an authority figure.¹⁰¹

Seventh, psychological research on glossolalia seems to be more objective today than it was in the past. William Kay says: “Early research on glossolalia was almost uniformly hostile, though with honourable exceptions, and this must reflect the value systems inherent within early psychology. . . . More recent investigation has been friendly, theologically informed and deliberately interdisciplinary.”¹⁰² Hopefully, there is less bias now. So, it is important to look for recent research, in order to correct eventual conceptual distortions inherited from various sources.

Eighth, glossolalia should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. “Recent research on glossolalia has been concerned with wider theological contexts, whether these are related to churches, theological symbols, ministerial functions, congregational growth or healing.”¹⁰³ It is important to discover what the role of glossolalia is in a community of faith and whether it has a positive or negative impact on personal/collective spirituality.

Ninth, glossolalia, regardless of its nature, should not be taken as a sign of orthodoxy or higher spiritual status. Who dares to deny today that the glossolalic Corinthians were immature, carnal, and almost heretic? For Bloesch, “tongues should be related to the childhood of faith or to new beginnings in faith,” appearing “when we try to integrate past memories embedded in the unconscious with the new vision.”¹⁰⁴ Classical Pentecostal understanding of tongues as a/the sign of Spirit-baptism has been challenged by sound exegesis.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, Paul answers this question with another question: “Do all speak in tongues?” (1 Cor 12:30). The logical answer is “no.” If the gift is given only to some (vs. 10), how can it be a sign for all? Paul, evidently, does not

consider the gift of tongues as normative for all believers.[106](#)

Finally, glossolalia in Christian settings should have at least a minimum of correspondence to the New Testament phenomenon. Hasel rightly says: “If any contemporary glossolalia is to be identified with the New Testament gift of tongues-speaking, then it will have to be demonstrated that it matches the New Testament definition and specifications for ‘speaking in tongues,’ including its source, its purpose, its nature, its orderliness, its outreach design and so on.”[107](#)

When evaluating an ambiguous phenomenon like glossolalia, one should be careful to avoid two pitfalls: (1) to accept it uncritically and (2) to reject it prejudicedly. The more ambiguous a phenomenon, the more one needs discernment.

For a long time, charismatics have spoken in tongues, and they certainly will continue to speak. Likewise, for a long time, researchers have spoken on tongues, and they probably will continue to speak. Speaking “in” or “on,” let the speakers speak intelligibly and with love, as Paul would advise.[108](#) There are different kinds of tongues and varieties of interpretations, but the goal is the same—to make sense of the sounds of glossolalia.

[Notes](#)

[1](#) This article is a revised version of my analysis of the gift of tongues presented in Marcos C. De Benedicto, “The Role of the Holy Spirit in Enabling Believers for Ministry: An Adventist Perspective” (D.Min. dissertation, Andrews University, 2004), 290-308.

[2](#) For a still helpful literary/bibliographic source on the subject, see Watson E. Mills, ed., *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research in Glossolalia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986)

[3](#) H. Newton Malony and A. Adams Lovekin, *Glossolalia: Behavioral Science Perspectives on Speaking in Tongues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985)

- [4](#) Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997).
- [5](#) Mark J. Cartledge, ed., *Speaking in Tongues: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives* (Bletchley, UK; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006).
- [6](#) C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 16.
- [7](#) Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament: A Study of Primitive Christian Teaching* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 72.
- [8](#) Mark 16 (vs. 17, in the so-called "longer ending"), Acts 2 (vss. 4, 6, 11), Acts 10 (vs. 46), Acts 19 (vs. 6), and 1 Cor 12-14 (12:31; 13:1; 14:2, 4, 5 [2x], 6, 13, 18, 19, 21, 23, 27, 39).
- [9](#) See Roy A. Harrisville, "Speaking in Tongues: A Lexicographical Study," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976): 35-48.
- [10](#) *Ibid.*, 45.
- [11](#) See Vern S. Poythress, "The Nature of Corinthian Glossolalia: Possible Options," *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (1977): 130-135; and Mark J. Cartledge, "The Nature and Function of New Testament Glossolalia," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 72 (2000): 136-139.
- [12](#) Bob Zerhusen, "An Overlooked Judean *Diglossia* in Acts 2?" *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 25 (1995): 118-130; *idem*, "The Problem Tongues in 1 Cor 14: A Reexamination," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 (1997): 139-152; and Renton Maclachlan, *Tongues Revisited: A Third Way* (Wellington, NZ: ClearSight, 2000).
- [13](#) For example, Robert H. Gundry, "'Ecstatic Utterance' (N.E.B.)?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1966): 299-307; Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts in the New Testament Church and Today*, rev. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 227-229; and Forbes, chapter 3 (44-74, especially 57-64).
- [14](#) Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 200, 201. See the *Testament of Job* 48-50.
- [15](#) Luke Timothy Johnson, "Glossolalia and the Embarrassments of Experience," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 18 (1997): 121.

[16](#) D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 85.

[17](#) See Poythress, 133.

[18](#) Gerd Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 304.

[19](#) Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 173.

[20](#) Frank D. Macchia, "Sighs Too Deep for Words: Towards a Theology of Glossolalia," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 (1992): 47-73.

[21](#) James K. A. Smith, "Tongues as 'Resistance Discourse': A Philosophical Perspective," in *Speaking in Tongues: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mark J. Cartledge (Bletchley, UK; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 81-110.

[22](#) For studies on diglossia in ancient Hebrew and first-century Palestine, see Stanley E. Porter, ed., *Diglossia and Other Topics in New Testament Linguistics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

[23](#) See the defense of this point of view in Zerhusen, cited above.

[24](#) William M. Harmening, *Mystery at Corinth: Seeking a Jewish Answer to a Christian Mystery* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2006).

[25](#) *Ibid.*, 97-109.

[26](#) John Lightfoot wrote: "While I consider these things used in the synagogues of the Jews, and remember that a great part of the church at Corinth consisted of Jews, I cannot but suspect that their ministers also used the same tongue according to the old custom; namely, that one read the scripture out of the Hebrew text, another prayed or preached in the Hebrew language according to the custom used in the synagogues. Which indeed the Apostle allowed, so there were an interpreter, as was done in the synagogue: because that language, full of mysteries, being rendered by a fit interpreter, might very much conduce to the edification of the church" (*Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859], 4:261, cited by Harmening, 108).

[27](#) Harmening, 108, 113.

[28](#) See, for example, Robert Gromacki, *The Holy Spirit: Who He Is, What He Does* (Nashville: Word, 1999), 229-232.

[29](#) At the Pentecost, according to Ellen G. White, the disciples (1) were enabled to speak with “fluency” and “accuracy” languages with which they “had been unacquainted”; (2) received this “miraculous gift” as an “evidence to the world that their commission bore the signet of Heaven”; and (3) now could permanently speak with precision in either “their native tongue or in a foreign language” of their target-audience (*The Acts of the Apostles* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911], 39-40).

[30](#) Morris L. Venden, *Your Friend, the Holy Spirit* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1986), 79-85.

[31](#) George E. Rice, “Spiritual Gifts,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 616-617. “Uttering sounds that cannot be identified with any human language is not a perversion of but a counterfeit of the genuine [gift of tongues],” he states (619).

[32](#) Ivan T. Blazen, *The Gospel on the Street: Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1997), 109-117.

[33](#) See the “Additional Note on [1 Corinthians] Chapter 14,” *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1957), 6:795-796.

[34](#) For a fine discussion of this central experience of the early Pentecostals, see Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 35-57.

[35](#) Smith, 98.

[36](#) John Bertone, “The Experience of Glossolalia and the Spirit’s Empathy: Romans 8:26 Revisited,” *Pneuma* 25 (2003): 54-65, citations from 54, 64.

[37](#) William E. Richardson, *Speaking in Tongues: Is It Still the Gift of the Spirit?* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1994), 55.

[38](#) See *ibid.*, 69-94.

[39](#) *Ibid.*, 91-92.

[40](#) Gerhard F. Hasel, *Speaking in Tongues: Biblical Speaking in Tongues and*

Contemporary Glossolalia (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1995), 43-51, 70-71, 119, 121-122, passim.

[41](#) As Hanz Conzelmann says, the basis for the Pentecost “account is clearly not a naive legend”; there is theological reflection (*Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], 15).

[42](#) Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 111; Jenny Everts, “Tongues or Languages? Contextual Consistency in the Translation of Acts 2,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 4 (1994), 71-80. For an additional discussion, see Gerald Hovenden, *Speaking in Tongues: The New Testament Evidence in Context* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 64-72.

[43](#) See Justin Taylor, “The List of the Nations in Acts 2:9-11,” *Revue Biblique* 106 (1999): 408-420 (quoted from summary). Probably knowing this list through literary tradition, Luke may have been also influenced by the preamble to Cyrus’s decree in 2 Chr 36:23.

[44](#) *Ibid.*, 419-420.

[45](#) J. G. Davies, “Pentecost and Glossolalia,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 3 (1952): 228-231.

[46](#) Frank D. Macchia, “Babel and the Tongues of Pentecost: Reversal or Fulfilment? A Theological Perspective,” in *Speaking in Tongues: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mark J. Cartledge (Bletchley, UK; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 34-51.

[47](#) See *ibid.*, 39-45. Insightfully, Macchia writes: “The tongues of Pentecost thus represent the first ecumenical language of the church. The first ecumenical language was not Greek or Latin. The tongues of Pentecost indicate that no single language can claim any absolute status with regard to one’s understanding of truth. . . . There is in this event of Pentecost an inherent protest against any effort to domesticate the gospel to a single idiom or culture” (47).

[48](#) See the verbal allusions in Acts 2 to Exod 19 and 20 worked out by Jacques Dupont in his book *The Salvation of the Gentiles: Essays on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 35-59. See also the parallels suggested by Harmening, 48-50. Regarding the giving of the law, Philo wrote that “a voice sounded forth in the midst of

the fire which had flowed down from heaven, a most marvelous and awful voice, the flame being endowed with articulate speech in a language familiar to the hearers” (*Decalogue* 11.46). Was Luke a reader of Philo?

[49](#) De Benedicto, 329.

[50](#) Max Turner correctly writes: “Luke appears to understand the Pentecost phenomenon . . . to be *xenolalia*: that is, the speaking of actual (but unlearned) foreign languages. This is suggested *prima facie* by the very word *glossa* (the regular lexeme for human language, especially as it is qualified by *hetera* (‘other’). More important, this sense is virtually demanded co-textually, where it is said of the crowd of diaspora pilgrims that ‘they each heard them *speaking in their own dialect*” (“Early Christian Experience and Theology of ‘Tongues’: A New Testament Perspective,” in *Speaking in Tongues: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mark J. Cartledge [Bletchley, UK; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006], 4, italics in original).

[51](#) For the possible presence and interpretation of glossolalia in the patristic age, see Harold Hunter, “Tongues-Speech: A Patristic Analysis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23 (1980): 125-137. According to Hunter, “when the fathers clarified the nature of the tongues-speech being practiced they most usually specified them as being xenolalic” (135).

[52](#) Let us remember that Paul only ceased to persecute the Christians after his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

[53](#) For example, Watson E. Mills writes: “[W]hen the texts of Acts and 1 Corinthians were written there was extant a widely known practice variously referred to by terms like ecstatic and ecstaticism. These ecstatic ‘states’ of being were generally at variance with the range of ‘normal’ behavior. These states were often, though not always, induced. In many instances the context of these altered states is described in specific ways that appear to fall well within the parameters of what today is regarded as a ‘religious context.’ The speech arising in these contexts is often, though not always, unintelligible on its face and was sometimes regarded as arising out of a god or gods. . . . [T]he elements of tongues accounts may well have their origin in the ancient ecstatic practices” (“Early Ecstatic Utterances and Glossolalia,” *Perspectives in Religious*

Studies 24 [1997]: 29-40, citation from 39, 40).

[54](#) Nils I. J. Engelsen, "Glossolalia and Other Forms of Inspired Speech According to I Corinthians 12-14" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1970), ii, 20-21, 23.

[55](#) "In the case of early Christian glossolalia I have argued that no convincing parallels whatsoever have been found within the traditions of Graeco-Roman religion, as they were known in the environment of the New Testament, whether it be at the level of terminology, phenomena or concept," Forbes concludes (316).

[56](#) T. M. Crone, *Early Christian Prophecy* (Baltimore: St. Mary's University Press, 1973), chapter 1.

[57](#) Hovenden, 6-30.

[58](#) A. C. Thiselton, "Realized Eschatology at Corinth," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978): 510-526; see also Carson, 16-17.

[59](#) The literature about Corinth is immense. For a helpful annotated bibliography on the archaeological evidence and topics related to the epistles of Paul to the Corinthians, see Ben Witherington III, *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 48-67.

[60](#) *ibid.*, 8.

[61](#) For interesting insights on glossolalia as status indicator, see D. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 87-103; and *idem*, "Tongues of Angels and Other Status Indicators," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1991): 547-589.

[62](#) Here in some way I am following John Chrysostom (*Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 29:1, 35:1), as well as Forbes (12, 172-174), who have a similar view about the origin of the status of tongues in Corinth.

[63](#) When Paul mentions "kinds of tongues" (1 Cor 12:10, 28), is he alluding to many kinds of languages or to multiple functions, species or expressions of tongues? Interpretations here vary. Anthony C. Thiselton stresses that we must take the word *gene* ("kinds," "sorts," "species") "with full seriousness" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000], 970). "Too much literature seeks to identify glossolalia as 'one thing'

when Paul takes pains to refer to different species,” says the scholar (*ibid.*, italics and bold removed from original). His opinion may be conditioned by his view of glossolalia as unintelligible, a “childish” characteristic of immature believers, but the warning is valid. Cyril G. Williams also carefully avoids pointing a straight meaning, for terms like ecstasy may have nuances (*Tongues of the Spirit: A Study of Pentecostal Glossolalia and Related Phenomena* [Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981], 30).

[64](#) William E. Richardson, “Liturgical Order and Glossolalia: 1 Corinthians 14:26c-33a and its Implications” (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1983), 244.

[65](#) Hasel, 123.

[66](#) Richardson, *Speaking in Tongues*, 75.

[67](#) Hasel, 126.

[68](#) In an editorial note to my dissertation (mentioned above), Dr. John T. Baldwin, my adviser, made the following remarks: “In 1 Cor 14, Paul seems to describe the problems of the Corinthian use of tongues. Thus, not all elements in 1 Cor 14 are normative. This shows that Hasel’s point of view is favored over [those of] Blazen and Richardson, who see no text in 1 Cor 14 as pejorative, but all as normative, which in my thinking is not correct. I think Paul is, as I said, describing the problem in 1 Cor 14:2, 14. Therefore, in these two texts, Paul is *not* telling us how things should be in speaking in tongues, but how they *should not be*. . . . Paul is saying: ‘If I speak in tongues the way you, dear people, are doing in Corinth, then my spirit is praying to God (I know what I am saying), but my mind (*nous*, idea, concept, thought, prayer in this context) is not fruitful *to those who are listening to me* (because I am speaking in a language they do not understand).’ The purpose of tongues in 1 Cor 14 is the edification of the church, and understanding is the only basis of edification in 1 Cor 14. Thus, the tongues-speaker edifies him or herself because the message is known.”

[69](#) Hasel would say that tongues are purely horizontal, which is why Paul criticized the non-intelligible manifestation. A horizontal communication which is unintelligible is useless. I am trying to broaden the concept in order to include the “praise” that clearly appears in both Luke and Paul as a vertical manifestation.

[70](#) Since the mystery religions of Corinth put emphasis on ecstaticism, Paul’s

preoccupation makes still more sense. “The expression of the ecstatic state took various forms, such as gashing one’s flesh, dancing nude in a frenzy, and speaking in ecstatic utterance,” describes H. Wayne House (“Tongues and the Mystery Religions of Corinth,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 [1983]: 139).

[71](#) In my view, the Corinthian glossolalia was not a counterfeit, for in this case Paul, with his gift to discern spirits, had prohibited the gift, not just corrected its use (see 1 Cor 14:39, 40). To argue that Paul did not forbid the phenomenon due to a pastoral concern, in order not to quench the charismata, only would make sense if Paul were sure that the phenomenon was not a counterfeit. That the phenomenon could be somewhat ambiguous, no question, but not a clear counterfeit. The Bible has no cases of true prophets, like Paul himself, condoning counterfeit phenomena in the name of pastoral diplomacy. Besides, Paul himself confesses to be a tongue-speaker (vs. 18).

[72](#) Midrash: a Hebrew method of searching and expounding Scripture, updating and applying ancient sacred texts to current situations in creative ways.

[73](#) See O. Palmer Robertson, “Tongues: Sign of Covenantal Curse and Blessing,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975): 43-53; B. C. Johanson, “Tongues, a Sign for Unbelievers? A Structural and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians XIV.20-25,” *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979): 180-203; J. P. M. Sweet, “A Sign for Unbelievers: Paul’s Attitude to Glossolalia,” *New Testament Studies* 13 (1967): 240-257; Wayne Grudem, “1 Corinthians 14:20-25: Prophecy and Tongues as Signs of God’s Attitude,” *Westminster Journal of Theology* 41 (1979): 381-396; Forbes, 175-181; Carson, 108-117.

[74](#) “It is reasonable to assume Luke considered the Pentecostal recognition of xenolalia, and the positive effect of this, to be a unique and providential sign marking the beginning of the age of the Spirit of prophecy: one that was not repeated exactly elsewhere,” comments Max Turner (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*, 226).

[75](#) Blaine Charette, “‘Tongues as of Fire’: Judgment as a Function of Glossolalia in Luke’s Thought,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 13 (2005): 173-186.

[76](#) Fee, 240. See also Sweet, 241, and Johanson, 193-194.

[77](#) Here one may object that the Corinthians did not know this theological technicality. Well, the right question is: Did Paul know this argument? And if he knew it or was able

to elaborate or just to cite it, would he do it? We must not underestimate Paul's theological sophistication or his tendency to elevate the level of the debate in spite of his audience's maturity.

[78](#) This means that one should not press much on this passage, or on Pentecost accounts, to make a case on the role of tongues as a physical initial evidence of the Spirit's presence. In our modern context, glossolalia may be used in a Corinthian fashion as a sign of a "higher" spirituality. Could in the future a gift of tongues more patterned by the Lukan account of xenolalia come to be known during a final outpouring of the Spirit in attestation of the remnant? This is, of course, speculation.

[79](#) Joop F. M. Smit, "Tongues and Prophecy: Deciphering 1 Cor 14,22," *Biblica* 75 (1994): 186, 187.

[80](#) Robert J. Gladstone, "Sign Language in the Assembly: How Are Tongues a Sign to the Unbeliever in 1 Cor 14:10-25?" *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2 (1999): 177-194, citations from 185, 192.

[81](#) Stephen J. Chester, "Divine Madness? Speaking in Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14.23," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 (2005): 417-446, citation from 419.

[82](#) *Ibid.*, 438-446, citations from 441, 443.

[83](#) A. C. Thiselton defends this second use in his article "The 'Interpretation' of Tongues? A New Suggestion in the Light of Greek Usage in Philo and Josephus," *Journal of Theological Studies* 30 (1979): 15-36. However, see the strong criticism of Forbes (65-72).

[84](#) Forbes argues that "there are a large number of cases [in Philo and Josephus] where 'to translate' or 'to interpret or expound' is the translation required" (65).

[85](#) See 1 Cor 12:10, 30; 14:13, 26-28.

[86](#) Forbes, 51.

[87](#) Reflecting the hypercritical view of the past on glossolalia, Merrill F. Unger wrote: "Much of what parades as an ecstatic utterance supposedly evidencing a deeper spiritual experience is mere gibberish produced by auto-suggestion under great emotional stress and strong desire for a tongues experience" (*New Testament Teaching on Tongues*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1973], 166).

[88](#) L. Carlyle May, "A Survey of Glossolalia and Related Phenomena in Non-Christian Religions," *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 75-96.

[89](#) R. P. Splittler, "Glossolalia," *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 336.

[90](#) *Ibid.*, 336.

[91](#) Unger, 163-164.

[92](#) D. Moody Smith suggests: "The modern critical view that the translation miracle of Acts is a later interpretation of Luke still seems the best one. . . . [M]odern glossolalia is probably a revival of the New Testament phenomenon as it is described by Paul" ("Glossolalia and Other Spiritual Gifts in a New Testament Perspective," *Interpretation* 28 (1974): 307-320, citation from 318. Well, in spite of his theological elaboration, Luke certainly wrote what he thought was a historical fact. Regarding the identification of modern glossolalia with the Corinthian gift of tongues, no one knows for sure if the phenomena are the same.

[93](#) See W. J. Samarin, "Glossolalia as Learned Behavior," *Canadian Journal of Theology* 15 (1969): 60-64.

[94](#) H. Newton Malony and A. Adams Lovekin, *Glossolalia: Behavioral Science Perspectives on Speaking in Tongues* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 28.

[95](#) W. J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 127-128.

[96](#) Malony and Lovekin, 32.

[97](#) *Ibid.*, 31, 63.

[98](#) In modern science, altered states of consciousness do not imply necessarily abnormality or psychopathology; today extraordinary phenomena are studied with less prejudice than in the past.

[99](#) Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 8, 124.

[100](#) Malony and Lovekin, 98, 99.

[101](#) John Kildahl, *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (New York: Harper & Row,

1972), 37, 54, 55.

[102](#) William K. Kay, "The Mind, Behaviour and Glossolalia: A Psychological Perspective," in *Speaking in Tongues: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mark J. Cartledge (Bletchley, UK; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 204. He summarizes: "Recent research has overturned most of the findings of earlier research: glossolalics are not in trance-like states when they are speaking in tongues; they do not show signs of psychopathology; they are not especially susceptible to hypnosis; they are not neurotic; evidence for social learning of glossolalia is weak; glossolalics are not especially dependent on authority figures; glossolalia may be, but need not to be, a sign of commitment to a charismatic group; the meaning of glossolalia may indeed be theologically derived, but this need not be to its detriment" (204-205). We must consider his positive evaluation, but I do not think that his conclusions invalidate my assessment of glossolalia.

[103](#) *Ibid.*, 205.

[104](#) Donald G. Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit: Works & Gifts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 196. Theissen also believes that "glossolalia does in fact exhibit regressive traits in linguistic, social, and psychological aspects" (312).

[105](#) For a recent bibliography on the Pentecostal doctrine of initial evidence, see Gerald J. Flokstra III, "Sources for the Initial Evidence Discussion: A Bibliographic Essay," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2 (1999): 243-259.

[106](#) See Max Turner, "Tongues: An Experience for All in the Pauline Churches?" *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1 (1998): 231-253.

[107](#) Hasel, 153.

[108](#) "Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air" (1 Cor 14:9). "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1).