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Toward a Mediating Understanding of Tongues: A Historical and Exegetical Examination of Early Literature

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Toward a Mediating Understanding of Tongues: A Historical and Exegetical Examination of Early Literature

Abstract

Studies regarding pneumatology and charismata have maintained distinctions largely due to previously held presuppositions. Christians have debated Luke's and Paul's usage of specific words and have taken diametrically opposite positions on this issue. This study will not attempt to answer the question of the legitimacy of spiritual gifts; we must, rather, begin from a proper understanding of words and concepts, thus allowing God's Word to change us if we are to be mindful of our obedience toward Him. This study will examine the historic meaning of the word and concept of tongues in order to better gauge Luke's and Paul's—and thus God's—meaning for proper obedience.

The issue under examination is a question of meaning: does the original meaning of tongues include only the miraculous endowment to speak an unlearned language, or only something related to the modern phenomenon of glossolalia, or an admixture of both? An examination of meaning includes an examination of historically contemporary authors, both biblical and extrabiblical.

There are a variety of ways that ancient authors recognized different tongues phenomena, but for the modern Christian, it is finally important to understand what Luke and Paul meant. While it is true that Cessationists are correct to understand Luke's use as that of a miraculously endowed foreign language, Paul and the Corinthians likely embraced a broader semantic range of this phenomenon.

Keywords

tongues, glossolalia, interpretation, prophecy, pneumatology, charismata, pneumatikon, Corinthians, Paul, Luke, angelic, charismatic, Delphi, Delphic Oracle, Sybil

Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION

Since the coming of the promised Spirit at Pentecost, the issue of tongues in the Church has been a difficult concept to wrestle with, especially considering more recent Charismatic phenomena. Many churches, and therefore church laity, must deal specifically with this issue at some point either directly or indirectly, regardless of theological presuppositions. This essay will not be an attempt to answer whether the gift of tongues, or indeed any gift, exists today, nor will it be an attempt to systematize tongues into any “gifts” category. Rather, this essay will attempt to examine tongues as it might be understood historically with the intention of identifying exactly what was meant by, and how we should understand, the manifestation of tongues in its historical context.¹ Thus, the following is a descriptive rather than a prescriptive approach. This examination will explore the following question: does the biblical and historical tongues phenomena include foreign languages, inarticulate speech patterns, or both? For the purposes of this essay, *glossolalia* will be defined as, “speaking in verbal patterns that cannot be identified with any human language,” and *xenoglossia* as, “speaking in unlearned human languages.”²

PROPHECY AND TONGUES: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

Modern movements range in opinion concerning the phenomena of tongues as found in Mark, Acts, and 1 Corinthians. On one extreme, some have endeavored to speak authoritatively on this issue based upon experience rather than proper exegesis.³ On the other hand, some have denounced those who purport to speak in tongues, based upon a dogmatic Cessationist theology *vice* an historical definition (*via* the concept or word study) of this phenomenon. The former position is in danger of an empirical and highly subjective theology; the latter is in danger of an overly systematized theology, bereft of the very objectivity it claims to value. In both cases, the mediator seems to be an exegetically sound hermeneutic, distanced from both experience and *a priori* theological suppositions regarding pneumatic gifts in general. The first examination, therefore, will be the extra-biblical literature

¹ As Robert Gromacki states, “An understanding of the nature and purposes of (tongues) in Biblical times is . . . imperative for each believer.” Robert Glenn Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1967), 2. As Gromacki points out, whether a Christian believes in this modern manifestation or not, it cannot be ignored based solely on one’s theological perspective.

² D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit, A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 79. While these are not “biblical” words, they are technical terms that are used here to describe the differences between speech patterns.

³ Richard Schwab, quoting Charles Ryrie, “There is no doubt that many fine Christians are experiencing something they call tongues, and their experiences are genuine. But as with all experiences the question is not, are they genuine, but, are they scriptural?” Richard Schwab, *Let the Bible Speak . . . About Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1983), 9. So also Larry D. Pettegrew, “. . . [P]ersonal experience provides no genuine way to reject the false experiences of systems with truth claims that are contradictory to biblical Christianity.”

concerning the concept of tongues, followed by an examination of the biblical material.

Any survey of extra-biblical literature concerning this phenomenon may be accomplished through a broad historical analysis, but due to the limits of this work, the survey will be narrowed to within one century prior to and three centuries following the actual phenomena in question (of Mark, Acts, and 1 Corinthians, ca. A.D. 50). Literature such as the *Report of Wenamon* and Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus* may provide valuable insights concerning the etymology of divinely inspired speech, but they are too far removed from the present topic to be of real exegetical value. After all, the present concern is not how Plato and others understood the tongues phenomena, but how the authors and audiences of New Testament literature would have understood it and, therefore, how modern readers should understand *biblical* tongues.⁴

EXTRA-BIBLICAL NON-CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

Publius Vergilius Maro (Virgil), the famous Roman poet (70-19 B.C.), described the Sibylline Oracle's practice:

As thus she spake before the doors, suddenly nor countenance nor colour was the same, nor stayed her tresses braided; but her bosom heaves, her heart swells with wild frenzy . . . nor has her voice a mortal ring, since now she feels the nearer breath of deity . . . the prophetess . . . storms wildly in the cavern, if so she may shake the mighty god from off her breast; so much the more he tires her raving mouth, tames her wild heart, and moulds her by constraint.⁵

This account may be describing an occurrence of *glossolalia*, though it is almost certainly not *xenoglossia*. It cannot be confirmed apodictically either way, but the issue at hand is one of a particular god-inspired speech. The poem was written in Latin, thus the *word* (γλώσσα, διάλεκτος) cannot be etymologically traced, but this piece of literature indicates that, at the very least, Roman, as well as Hellenistic, culture was acquainted with the concept of a "god-possession" (in this case, Apollo) resulting in frenzied, divinely inspired pneumatic speech.

Similarly, Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (Lucan, A.D. 39-65) wrote about the Delphic Oracle. Notably, this account also included Apollo as the possessor. The

⁴ "The 'Report of Wenamon' gives the most ancient account of frenzied religious speech . . . about 1100 B.C. from Byblos . . . Plato (429-347 B.C.) revealed an acquaintance with religious, ecstatic speech . . . [i]n the *Phaedrus* . . . (and) the *Timaeus*." Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement*, 6-7.

⁵ Virgil *Aeneid* 6.46 (cf. Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech In Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997], 137). It should be noted that Forbes believes that this account, along with others, is describing not *glossolalia*, but phonologically clear oracular mysteries, and therefore cannot be equated directly with Pauline or Lukan "tongues." Gromacki, however, believes this to be an occurrence of tongues (Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement*, 7).

prophetess is described in similar terms of frenzy, but in this case, she is also given over to “groan(ing) and utter(ing) loud inarticulate cries with panting breath.”⁶

Perhaps the most unambiguous references to γλῶσσα in the body of non-Christian literature contemporary to New Testament authors are those of Diodorus Siculus, who lived from 90 to 21 B.C., and Plutarchus, who lived from around A.D. 46 to 120. Diodorus wrote: “And since (the Delphic Oracle) was often like one inspired when she delivered oracles, they say that she was also called Sibylla, for to be inspired in one’s tongue (κατὰ γλῶτταν) is expressed by the word sibyllainein.”⁷ Clearly, γλῶτταν differs morphologically from γλῶσσαν, but scholars believe this to be a dated expression of the same term.⁸ It is arguable whether this refers to *glossolalia*, or simply to inspired prose. Considering the previously mentioned writings concerning the Delphic oracle of this same period, Diodorus may be referring to a congruent, frenzied, ecstatic, foaming *glossolalia*, but considering the “sibyllainein” reference, it is possible that this rather refers to oracular hexameter.⁹

Plutarch, a priest of the Oracle of Delphi wrote extensively on the Oracle: “But the Sibyl ‘with frenzied lips,’ . . . ‘uttering words mirthless, unembellished, unperfumed, yet reaches to a thousand years with her voice through the god,”¹⁰ and again, “(In the past, Apollo) had taken away from the oracles epic versification, strange words (γλῶττας), circumlocutions, and vagueness.”¹¹ In another work (*Obsolescence of Oracles*), Plutarch states,

What need to speak of (other Oracles) . . . which in former times spoke with many tongues (λέγειν . . . πολυφωνον) because of its oracles. . . The prophetic priest of (another) oracle, accustomed in former times to the use of the Aeolic dialect (φωνή Αἰολιδι), on that occasion took the side of the barbarians and gave forth an oracle such that no one else of those

⁶ Lucan *The Civil War* 5.166ff “(Apollo) forced his way into her body, driving out her former thoughts, and bidding her human nature to come forth . . . frantic she careers about the cave . . . she whirls with tossing head . . . she boils over with fierce fire . . . first the wild frenzy overflowed through her foaming lips; she groaned and uttered loud inarticulate cries with panting breath . . . at last, when she was mastered, came the sound of articulate speech,” (cf. Forbes., 138). Forbes points out that only while the prophetess is struggling *against* the god does she speak unintelligibly; when she is mastered, she speaks articulately *contra* the biblical phenomena.

⁷ Diodorus Siculus, *Diodorus of Sicily IV.66* (cf. *Diodorus Siculus in Twelve Volumes, III, Books IV (continued) 59-VIII with an English Translation by C.H. Oldfather*, trans. C.H. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. P., 1970), 30-31).

⁸ “(Either) γλῶσσα here means antiquated, foreign, unintelligible, mysterious utterances (Diod. S. 4, 66, 7 κατὰ γλῶτταν = according to an old expression) . . . (or) a speaking in marvelous, celestial languages.” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Early New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, 3d ed., eds. Fredrick William Danker, Walter Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 201.

⁹ Contra *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Early New Testament*, 201.

¹⁰ Plutarch *Moralia: The Oracles at Delphi* 397, “Σιβυλλα δε μαινονενο στοματι καθ’ Ἡρακλειτον ἀγελαστα και ἀκαλλωπιστα και ἀμυριστα φθεγγομενη χιλίων ἔτων ἐξικνεεται τη φωνη δια τον θεον.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 406.

present comprehended it, but only Mys himself, since it is quite clear from the inspired language then used by the prophetic priest that it is not for barbarians ever to receive a word in the Greek tongue. . .¹²

Notably, in these cases, *πολυφωνον* refers to *xenoglossia*, and *γλώσσαν* refers either (or both) to mysterious hexameter or *glossolalia*. Diodorus appears to distinguish *γλώσσα* as oracular, mysterious prose, whereas Plutarch seems to define *γλώσσα* as particularly glossolalic. This does not necessitate that the words are defined *as such*, and there may be more flexibility than these particular definitions allow.

Other Latin writers such as Titus Livius (59 B.C. – ca. A.D. 11) and Gaius Valerius Catullus (84-54 B.C.) wrote concerning similar oracular concepts indicating that the Hellenes understood there to be a possible correlation between prophecy (god-inspired speech) and madness. One might relate their prophecies with *glossolalia*, though Forbes would disagree.¹³ The concept of inarticulate speech can be demonstrably shown to exist amongst the Hellenes, but the word (*γλώσσα*) remains questionably ambiguous in most contexts regarding a specific, intended meaning of *glossolalia* or *xenoglossia*. Indeed, Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus both seem to view *γλώσσα* as a human language (though this does not preclude the idea of *γλώσσα* being an incoherent, non-human language, this remains to be seen), but Diodorus and Plutarch seem to hold a more fluid definition.¹⁴ While there is some ambiguity regarding the normal usage of the word and/or concept of *γλώσσα*, the essay will now review extra-biblical Christian literature.

EXTRA-BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

Perhaps more relevant to the subject at hand is how the early Church fathers understood *γλώσσα* as a concept and term. Although there were many theological controversies at this time, these witnesses were closer to the original recipients of the letters and thus, more able to distinguish nuances, customs, and culture more readily than modern readers. This does not necessarily indicate a *proper* understanding of tongues, but a more *relevant* understanding of the cultural phenomenon.

Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202), a disciple of Polycarp, who was in turn a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote concerning the subject of tongues:

¹² Plutarch *Obsolescence of Oracles* 411-412.

¹³ “(the Hellenistic world) included terms like ἀμφιβολος, ἀμφιλογος, ὑπονοια, ἀσαφεια, and σκια. These terms are *never*, so far as I am aware, used by Christian writers to describe inspired speech phenomena within their communities.” Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech*, 113-114.

¹⁴ Josephus demonstrates his use of these words (*γλώσσα* and *διαλεκτος*) to be nearly synonymous, “This whole nation was styled Hycsos—that is, shepherd-kings: for the first syllable, Hyc, according to the sacred dialect (ἱερὰν γλῶσσαν), denotes a king, as is Sos a shepherd, but this according to the ordinary dialect (κοινὴν διάλεκτον); and of these is compounded Hycsos. But some say that these people were Arabians.” Flavius Josephus *Against Apion* 1.82. Cf. Philo *De Confusione Linguarum* 9, “. . . the separation of language into an infinite variety of dialects. . . Moses calls the confusion of tongues” (φωνῆς εἰς μυρίας διαλέκτων ἰδέας τομὴν . . . καλεῖ γλώττης σύγχθσιν).

(Paul says) “We speak wisdom among them that are perfect,” (1 Cor. 2:6) terming those persons “perfect” who have received the Spirit of God, and who through the Spirit of God do speak in all languages, as he used Himself also to speak. In like manner we do also hear many brethren in the Church, who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God, whom also the apostle terms “spiritual,” they being spiritual because they partake of the Spirit, and not because their flesh has been stripped off and taken away, and because they have become purely spiritual.¹⁵

Irenaeus may be speaking of *xenoglossia* or *glossolalia*, though the context seems to favor foreign languages, given the English terms “all languages” and “all kinds of language.” One must either believe that Irenaeus thought that these terms included *all sorts* of inarticulate speech or that inarticulate speech is a *subcategory of human language*, or he simply meant *all sorts of human cognitive speech*.¹⁶

Tertullian (A.D. 160-220) also wrote on this topic, rejecting Marcion’s position:

When he mentions the fact that “*it is written in the law*,” how that the Creator would speak with other tongues and other lips, whilst confirming indeed the gift of tongues by such a mention, he yet cannot be thought to have affirmed that the gift was that of another god by his reference to the Creator’s prediction (1 Cor. 14:21).¹⁷

In this reference, Tertullian is arguing from 1 Corinthians 14:21 that the tongues reference supports the foreign language definition (in this case, Greek being the “other tongues”), while (according to Tertullian) Marcion believes that there is

¹⁵ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.6.1.

¹⁶ According to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Early New Testament*, 201, the text states, “λαλούντων διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος γλώσσαις,” of which they say that, “(t)here is no doubt about the thing referred to, namely the strange speech of persons in religious ecstasy.” Here, it can be seen that the English translation, rendered “all languages,” *may* be misleading, as γλώσσαις is not distinguishably “all” tongues. Origen further demonstrates his usage of the concept when he quotes Celsus: “However, let us see what he considers the most perfect kind of prophecy among these nations. ‘There are many,’ he says, ‘who, although of no name, with the greatest facility and on the slightest occasion, whether within or without temples, assume the motions and gestures of inspired persons . . .’ He then goes on to say: ‘To these promises are added strange, fanatical, and quite unintelligible words, of which no rational person can find the meaning: for so dark are they, as to have no meaning at all; but they give occasion to every fool or impostor to apply them to suit his own purposes.’” Origen *Against Celsus* 7.9. This is a most obvious description, though Origen cites it negatively and the actual term (γλωσσα) is not used of *glossolalia*.

¹⁷ Tertullian *Against Marcion* 5.8.

another god involved in the giving of the gift of tongues (thus probably *glossolalia*, though it is uncertain whether he uses γλῶσσα, as the extant text is Latin [rendered, “*linguis . . . linguarium*” from above text]). Again, Tertullian speaks concerning spiritual gifts in his polemic against Marcion:

Let Marcion then exhibit, as gifts of his god, some prophets, such as have not spoken by human sense, but with the Spirit of God, such as have both predicted things to come, and have made manifest the secrets of the heart; let him produce a psalm, a vision, a prayer—only let it be by the Spirit, in an ecstasy, that is, in a rapture, whenever an interpretation of tongues has occurred to him; let him show to me also, that any woman of boastful tongue in his community has ever prophesied from amongst those specially holy sisters of his.¹⁸

Tertullian later states that his own God has provided his disciples with these very gifts, and he indicates that he very much doubts that Marcion can provide similar evidence. It is interesting to note that Tertullian correlates “ecstasy, that is . . . rapture, whenever an interpretation of tongues has occurred,” in agreement with the previously mentioned Hellenistic notion of the famous “god-inspired” oracle-prophetesses.¹⁹ There appears to be, in Tertullian’s mind, a very close correlation between prophecy, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.

Eusebius’ (A.D. 263 – ca. 339) account of Montanus (ca. A.D. 150) is most valuable concerning this issue. Although some of Eusebius’ *Church History* is exaggerated, his source for Montanus is quoted directly from an anonymous author:

I came to Ancyra in Galatia and found that the local church was torn apart by . . . false prophecy . . . (which) started while Gratus was proconsul of Syria . . . Montanus . . . became obsessed and, in his frenzy, fell into a trance. He began raving, chattering, and speaking nonsense (λαλεῖν καὶ ξηνοφωνεῖν), prophesying contrary to church tradition . . . (Some) censured him and tried to stop his babble . . . [T]he Devil . . . raised up two others—women whom he infused with the spurious spirit so that they babbled madly, abnormally, and grotesquely, like Montanus.²⁰

Eusebius continues, quoting Miltiades: “But the pseudoprophet speaks in ecstasy (παρεκστάσει), without shame or fear. He begins with intentional ignorance but ends in unintentional madness. They cannot show that any prophet, either in the Old or New Testament, was inspired in this way.”²¹ Although it can be seen that

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. Of course, it comes as no surprise that Tertullian embraced the miraculous gifts, considering his Montanist background.

²⁰ Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16.3ff.

²¹ Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 5.17.2-3.

Montanus' belief stems from the Hellenistic notion of prophetic utterance, it should be noted that Eusebius' quote does not mention γλῶσσα, but only “προφητην ἐν ἑκστασει λαλειν,” which Eusebius, in agreement with his orthodox contemporaries, condemns.

EXTRA-BIBLICAL HISTORICAL SUMMATION

It can be shown that both *glossolalia* and *xenoglossia* existed in concept in the New Testament authors' time, but the terms γλῶσσα and φωνή are somewhat less concrete than a historical definition may allow. Apparently, some used the terms solely to express known human speech patterns (cf. Josephus, Philo, though their writings do not preclude a broader definition); others probably used the term more fluidly (cf. Tertullian, Irenaeus), and still others seem to use the term to indicate mysterious prophetic language (cf. Diodorus, Plutarch). Therefore, while a unilateral definition cannot be justified in this historical setting, some conclusions may be drawn: (1) The *concepts* of both *glossolalia* and *xenoglossia* existed at this time period, with direct reference to oracular prophecy; (2) primarily, γλῶσσα referred to known human speech patterns, and unless context demands, it should be understood in this sense; (3) διάλεκτος always seems to have referred to known languages, inspired or otherwise;²² (4) Some authors used γλῶσσα and φωνή to refer to either mysterious oracular hexameter, *xenoglossia*, or *glossolalia* (all three connected with prophecy when used in this supernatural sense), though not exclusively, and only context can provide clues in any piece of literature. With this in mind, the subject turns to biblical literature.

Γλῶσσα AS FOUND IN ACTS AND 1 CORINTHIANS

Considering the historical context, a cautious approach is imperative. One cannot, after all, assign an arbitrary definition for tongues based on sweeping definitions, nor can the topic be dismissed simply based upon theological preference. In the New Testament, only Acts and 1 Corinthians mention the concepts under review. Considering the spurious nature of Mark 16:17,²³ it can only be considered in light of historical manuscript evidence, rather than as part of a biblical survey. Acts, authored by Luke, will be considered first.

²² For more evidence in the body of Christian literature on this point, see *Fragments of Papias* 3.16 with Papias' well known reference to the Hebrew dialect (Ἑβραϊδι διαλέκτω) and *The Epistle of Diognetus* 5.1-2 (ca. A.D. 150-225, according to Michael Holmes), “For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language (φῶνη), or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak in some unusual dialect (διαλέκτω . . . παρηλλαγμένη), nor do they practice an eccentric life-style.”

²³ See Bruce Metzger, *A Textual critical Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d. ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994), 102-6.

ACTS 2, 10, AND 19

There are only three explicit references to tongues in Acts, though a fourth is probably implied (8:17-18).²⁴ The first, found in Acts 2:4, comes as a reference to Jesus' statement in Acts 1:8. Jesus promises that the disciples will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes (1:8), and the disciples began speaking in tongues (2:4): "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues (λαλεῖν ἑτέραις γλώσσαις), as the Spirit was giving them utterance."²⁵ Taken alone, this may be ambiguous, but tongues is described further in 2:5-13. First, Luke describes the different ethnic groups present who heard them "διαλέκτῳ λαλούντων αὐτῶν."²⁶ Not only does the context dictate one's understanding of tongues in this passage, but the historical use of these words is also helpful. Γλώσσαις may be loosely defined, but the fact that Luke mentions the different people groups who heard them helps confine this use to "foreign languages." That Luke brings more clarity using διαλέκτῳ leaves little question. Some have argued that 2:6 should be interpreted as an audible miracle and 2:13 indicates an ecstatic *glossolalia*; however, to interpret the text in this way ignores Luke's purpose in this narrative, namely, that the *disciples* will receive power from the Holy Spirit.²⁷ One is hard-pressed to believe that the *unbelievers* would receive power, given Acts' general context (the disciples receive power from the Holy Spirit to testify about Jesus Christ). A more natural reading of this text allows for *xenoglossia*, while the alternate reading (*glossolalia*) demands unnecessary exegetical twists.²⁸ It is also unnecessary to view 2:13 as an ecstatic glossolalic occurrence, but rather one of praise (though, it is difficult to argue against Lukan-Pauline similarities).²⁹ The accusation that the believers were

²⁴ While it remains inconclusive, Simon's response in Acts 8:18 indicates that there was *some* outward manifestation of power when the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit, and up to this point in the narrative the precedent manifestation was tongues and prophecy in Acts 2.

²⁵ C.K. Barrett, "There can be no doubt that Luke saw the event described here as the fulfilment (sic) of the promise of 1.5 (ἐν πνεύματι βαπτισθήσεσθε ἁγίῳ: cf. 1.8); it therefore appears that filling with the Holy Spirit and baptism with the Holy Spirit are synonymous." C.K. Barrett, *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments: Acts 1-14* (New York: T & T Clark, 1994), 115.

²⁶ Luke 2:6.

²⁷ While some may object to this point, my conclusion does not stand or fall on this point. That is, it is offered as supporting evidence and should be understood as such.

²⁸ F.F. Bruce, quoting P. Loyd, posits, "What happened on that occasion was that the multitude of pilgrims heard the Christians praising God in ecstatic utterances; and were amazed to observe that many of the words which they uttered were not Jewish or Greek words at all, but belonged to the local languages of Egypt, Asia Minor, and Italy." He believes that this phenomenon pointed more toward the ecstatic experience, and relates it closely with Paul's letter. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 52.

²⁹ "It is difficult therefore to believe that anyone in personal contact with the Pauline mission was unfamiliar with the phenomenon. If we are obliged to conclude that Luke was unfamiliar with it we shall probably have to infer that he was not a member of the Pauline circle." Ibid., 116. However, in light of the aforementioned historical accounts, the fluidity of prophetic utterance phenomena may account for the slight differences in the nature of tongues.

“drunk” may be understood in light of *xenoglossia*.³⁰ Of particular note, Peter, to the crowd, in Acts 2:16-21, does not refer to this phenomenon as “speaking in tongues.” The outward manifestation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, explains Peter, is “prophecy,” which is not mentioned in the text until this point. If “prophecy” was a part of the outward manifestation, tongues aside, then the Luke does not mention it prior to Peter’s sermon. It may be that tongues in both Peter’s and Luke’s estimation was a subcategory of “prophecy.”³¹

One’s interpretation of the Acts 2 tongues event will influence the interpretation of the following references in Acts. When the Gentiles at Cornelius’ house begin speaking in tongues, Peter states that “(they) have received the Holy Spirit *just as we have*” (Acts 10:47). Once again, this phrase “λαλούντων γλώσσαις” is closely connected with exalting God. In this instance, some have made much out of the fact that the modifying *ἕτερος* is missing (not modifying γλώσσαις). This, however, is probably an abbreviation of the same phenomenon (cf. Acts 10:47).

In Acts the final reference to tongues is found in 19:6. In this instance, the disciples of John receive the Holy Spirit after Paul explains to them the gospel of Jesus Christ. After Paul lays his hands upon them, the “Holy Spirit came upon them, and they *began* speaking with tongues and prophesying (ἐλάλουν τε γλώσσαις καὶ ἐπροφήτευον).”³² Prophecy is once again closely linked with speaking in tongues. In this occurrence, γλώσσαις is once again missing the modifying *ἕτερος*, and there is no mention of the incident being “just as” the previous occurrences. However, one can safely assume that, just as in 10:47, this event is painted similarly to the previous events due to Luke’s literary flow. Luke assumes that the reader should know by this point in the narrative what he means by γλώσσαις.

In Acts, Luke’s emphasis is focused more upon the inspiration of *bold speech* rather than the tongues themselves. This does not mean that tongues were not emphasized, but only that the real issue at hand was the manifestation of Holy Spirit activity. On the one hand, the Spirit provided the apostles with the ability to work supernaturally, and on the other hand, the Spirit provided an outward manifestation to each new people-group for the apostles’ sake, as a confirmation that the New Covenant was, most assuredly, expanding “even to the uttermost parts of the earth.”³³

³⁰ Namely, that many people were speaking foreign languages, and that a person not understanding one particular “tongues-speaker” would discount the entire group as drunkards.

³¹ So D.A. Carson, “. . . on the day of Pentecost when the believers spoke in tongues, Peter insisted that this tongues-speaking was evidence that the last day promised by Joel had dawned, the day on which sons and daughters would *prophesy* (Acts 2:17, citing Joel). The range of the ‘prophet’ word group was certainly broad enough to encompass tongues-speaking.” Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 100.

³² Acts 19:6.

³³ Acts 1:8b.

FIRST CORINTHIANS 12-14

Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church provides a substantial amount of information for the current study, even considering secular material.³⁴ Even so, the material at hand has been the subject of many debates due to the somewhat ambiguous nature of the text. Paul does not define tongues but assumes the reader knows what he means by the term. It is therefore essential, if one desires to understand Paul's meaning, to allow Paul to speak for himself on this issue before any premature decision is made in defining "tongues."

This epistle is Paul's first letter to a divided, spiritually immature local church that placed great emphasis on spectacular *charismata*.³⁵ In the pericope (Chapters 12-14), Paul is addressing a proper attitude toward "spiritual gifts." Some issues to note throughout this section are: (1) tongues (*γλῶσσαι*) is very closely linked to the interpretation of tongues (*ἐρμηνεία γλωσσῶν*); (2) prophecy, tongues, and interpretation are emphasized (or more appropriately, deemphasized, at least concerning tongues), especially in chapter 14; and (3) Paul's general theme in this pericope is a major realignment of the Corinthian priorities.

Paul begins this section³⁶ with "I make it plain to you that no one speaking in God's Spirit says Jesus is anathema."³⁷ Notably, Corinth was situated less than 100 miles from Delphi. Due to this close geographical proximity, the verse may be significant.³⁸ In his comments concerning individual spiritual gifts (12:7-10), Paul pointedly deemphasizes the symptomatic problem, namely, tongues by placing it last in the list (cf. v. 28; also chapter 14). The Corinthians had an apparent priority problem with the spectacular spiritual gifts, and specifically with tongues.³⁹

Paul corrects the Corinthian motivational priorities regarding spiritual gifts in chapter 13. The text under examination is 13:1, "If I were to speak with the tongues of men and of angels."⁴⁰ There are two ways to understand the "tongues of

³⁴ While I recognize the debate surrounding the Corinthian correspondence and the possible primacy of another Corinthian letter (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9), this debate is unrelated to the current subject. I use the terminology "first letter" in the sense of canonical and not necessarily chronological order.

³⁵ Cf. 1 Cor 1:10ff.; 3:1-5; 4:6-7; 4:18-19; 5:1-13; 6:13-20.

³⁶ That is, confined narrowly to the current subject of tongues; the limits of this essay preclude a broader analysis of the text. The pericope begins in verse 1 with *περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν* ("now regarding spiritual [gifts or things]," or perhaps "now regarding things related to the Spirit").

³⁷ 1 Cor. 12:2.

³⁸ Note the references to the Delphic Oracle in the previous section. So also C.K. Barrett, "neither Paul nor his readers doubted that there were other spirits capable of inspiring ecstatic speech" C.K. Barrett, *Harper's New Testament Commentaries: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 279.

³⁹ "Paul places gifts related to tongues at the end of his list . . . ; it is probable that the Corinthians rated them much higher." *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴⁰ Note the subjunctive: "Ἐὰν ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαλῶ καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων." Thus, it is improbable that Paul is using a self-referential experience, but only posing a hypothetical (but in the minds of the Corinthians, a very real) possibility as his protasis. See Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1032.

angels.” One might understand Paul to be speaking hyperbolically. The argument has significant weight, as the following verses (2-3) follow a similar pattern.⁴¹ Paul may, however, be referring to his belief that the tongues practiced (by him and the Corinthians) are a form of divinely inspired angelic speech, indecipherable barring divine interpretation.⁴² Although the former position is probably in line with “xenoglossic speech” interpretation, and the latter seems in line with a “glossolalic utterance” interpretation, they are both secondary to Paul’s primary point: whatever the tongues of men and angels are, they are relegated under “love”; it is difficult to conclude either interpretation without first assuming prejudice.⁴³

Paul concludes his admonitions regarding τῶν πνευματικῶν in chapter 14. This chapter has more references to supernatural γλῶσσα (sixteen occurrences) than any other book in the New Testament. There is a single occurrence in Mark 16:17, which is contested to being in the original, four occurrences in Acts (2:4, 11; 10:46; 19:6), and twenty-two occurrences in 1 Corinthians, the majority in chapter 14 (12:10, 28, 30; 13:1, 8; 14:2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 13, 14, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 39); this does not include *all* occurrences of γλῶσσα, but only those that are clearly referring to something other than the normal sense, that is a non-miraculous, known human speech pattern, or the tongue (body part).

Of the sixteen occurrences of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14, nine of them are singular and seven are plural. Some argue that this is exegetically significant, positing that the singular (γλῶσσα) should be understood as a counterfeit gift and the plural (γλῶσσαι) as a truly pneumatic one.⁴⁴ If this premise is true, then every occurrence should bear the weight of this conclusion, especially if Paul were making the distinction himself, or if he expected his audience to understand the semantic difference. The conclusion is that Paul is condemning the *pagan* practice (read: singular γλῶσσα) of glossolalic tongues and condoning the *authentic* practice (read:

⁴¹ Carson notes that Paul’s possible use of hyperbole may be to “draw as sharp a contrast as possible with love . . .” Carson further “suppose(s) a pedant might argue that they cannot be the tongues of angels, because in that case it would be silly for tongues to cease when perfection comes since that is precisely when we are more likely to encounter angels!” Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 58.

⁴² Barrett cites Revelation 14:2ff; 2 Corinthians 12:4 (both seem to the present author to be exegetically flimsy at best); H.L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 1922-1928. Carson supposes a better source for angelic speech is found in the Testament of Job 48-50.

⁴³ It is apparent, however, that the Corinthians would have at least *believed* that glossolalic speech was possible in light of their close proximity to Delphi and the significance that the Delphic Oracle had on Hellenistic culture. Note that the Corinthian reader would have read “tongues of angels,” readily accepting the possibility that one may speak such a language.

⁴⁴ “Apparently the apostle used the singular form to indicate the counterfeited gift and the plural to indicate the true. . . There are no kinds of pagan ecstatic speech; there are, however, kinds of languages in the true gift, for which the plural tongues is used.” John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 373. Cf. also MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2005), 1599-1600.

plural *γλῶσσαι*) of xenoglossic tongues.⁴⁵ Inductively, if there are any occurrences that do not bear this argument, then the premise is incorrect.

Thus, Paul's charge in 1 Corinthians 14:13 is central to an understanding regarding this argument: "Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue (singular dative without a preposition: *γλώσση*) pray that he may interpret." If the posited argument is true, one must assume that Paul is being either sarcastic or contradictory. Yet, this verse does not seem to allow easily for sarcasm,⁴⁶ and a contradiction is even harder to justify. On exegetically safer ground, it is unnecessary to view the singular or plural as anything inherently "counterfeit" or "genuine." As previously seen, the term may be more fluid, in the minds of both Paul and the Corinthians, than the argument allows. However, Paul may bear in his mind some distinguishing features. He was almost certainly familiar with the events of Pentecost, meaning that Paul's own understanding of *γλῶσσαι* may be justifiably understood as *xenoglossia*.⁴⁷ But if the above argument is modified somewhat (in the sense that both *γλῶσσα* [*glossolalia*] and *γλῶσσαι* [*xenoglossia*] have no inherently *Spirit-less* connotations), then Paul's argument makes more sense. He is not condemning the practice of *glossolalia*, but is urging the Corinthians to approach the gift in a proper attitude, with the established priorities in mind.

The issue of the *γλῶσσα/γλῶσσαι* interpretation is foundational to Paul's argument. He desires that the Corinthians might speak in tongues (fluidly, *xenoglossia* or *glossolalia*; note the historical context previously mentioned) but even more that they would prophesy. Paul further states that "one who prophesies (is greater) than the one who speaks in tongues *unless he interprets*."⁴⁸ As has already been stated, the Hellenes probably viewed tongues as a subcategory of "prophecy." In fact, the Corinthian church was so enamored with the spectacular spiritual gifts that they viewed tongues as the *most* spectacular. Paul was addressing this very issue: (1) he permitted the use of tongues as long as they were subordinated to a proper use, i.e.: that love is the common denominator for the use of *all* gifts (1 Cor. 13:1-3); (2) they must be accompanied with interpretation in the church-body context for the purpose of edifying the church (14:5-13); (3) tongues without interpretation edifies only the tongues-speaker (14:4, 16-17); (4) tongues without interpretation is not to be practiced in the assembly, but between oneself and God (14:28); and (5) the spiritual gift of tongues is a sign for unbelievers (14:22-23).⁴⁹ In light of the fact that Paul is *correcting* the Corinthian behavior, it can be

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1600.

⁴⁶ *Contra* MarArthur, who insists that Paul must be sarcastic here, but MacArthur simply begs the question (assuming the contended point in order to make his conclusion) as he makes his argument; cf. MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, 376.

⁴⁷ ". . .there is no substantial evidence that suggests Paul thought the two were *essentially* different." Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 83.

⁴⁸ 1 Cor. 14:5.

⁴⁹ This is a difficult passage; it seems that the "gift" of tongues differs from the tongues of Acts, at least in this respect: the tongues in Acts were *specifically* for the apostles, *contra* 1 Cor. Some argue that the Acts tongues were for unbelievers, citing Acts 2; however, Peter's sermon, not tongues, was the evangelistic tool of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the tongues in Acts (even in Ch. 2)

inferred from the text that the Corinthians were using tongues in diametric opposition to Paul's correctives, thus the Corinthians were generally *not* exercising love with the gift, *not* interpreting, *not* focusing on edifying the church, and using the gift in the church for self-edification. It should also be noted that the gift of tongues, by the inference from the gift of interpretation, must communicate an objective truth; otherwise, as D.A. Carson notes, the gift of interpretation is nothing more than prophecy.⁵⁰ Thus, the tongues of Corinth, although possibly similar in manifestation to the contemporaneous phenomena in Hellenistic and Roman culture discussed above, must communicate an objective statement (there is every indication that Paul believed the gift to contain *cognitive content* though not necessarily via known human or angelic languages).

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the historical and exegetical evidence, “tongues,” properly understood, may be defined somewhat distinctively in Acts and 1 Corinthians. In Acts, the context and theme indicates from the historical narrative of a phenomenon unique to the new Church that the occurrences were most likely *xenoglossia*—though the latter references could be *glossolalia*, but for reasons stated above, the latter possibility is unlikely. The Corinthian gift of tongues, on the other hand, seems best interpreted more fluidly. Paul may have differentiated between the singular use and plural use of *γλῶσσα*, but if he did, he did not indicate a more genuine manifestation. Indeed, if he had in mind that the singular *γλῶσσα* was a glossolalic utterance, he commissioned its use in 1 Corinthians 14:13. However, it is unnecessary to view Paul's singular and plural usage as distinguishable in essence, and it is best interpreted in light of the local historical context and Paul's personal experience: he may have understood *glossolalia* to be a subcategory of *xenoglossia*. In Paul's mind, however, *glossolalia* most certainly did not mean “gibberish” or “unintelligible speech.” Rather, the content of tongues certainly contained a specific message, uniquely interpreted through another spiritual gift, given by God, and not to be confused with any subjectively interpretive methodology.

were specifically signs for *believers*. The next difficulty is: in what sense were the Corinthian tongues a “sign” for unbelievers? For a fuller explanation, Carson provides a list of interpretations of this passage. He views “unbelievers” as “unbelieving Israelites”: “The ‘strange tongues’ therefore do not convey content to the unbelieving Israelites, but they do serve as a sign—a *negative* sign, a sign of judgment.” Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 114.

⁵⁰ “After all, the interpretation issues in intelligible speech, cognitive content; and if it is not in fact a rendering of what was spoken in tongues, then the gift of interpretation is not only misnamed but also must be assessed as undifferentiable from the gift of prophecy. The tight connection Paul presupposes between the content of the tongues and the intelligible result of the gift of interpretation demands that we conclude the tongues in Corinth, as Paul understood them, bore cognitive content.” Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 86.

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