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Tongues in the New Testament

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REFERENCE TO THE phenomenon of tongues in the NT is confined to Mark 16: 17; Acts 2: 4; 10: 46; 19: 6 and 1 Corinthians 12-14. It is quite possible, of course, that further references to the same phenomenon lie behind such passages as 2 Corinthians 12: 12, 13; Romans 15: 18, 19 as well as 1 Thessalonians 5: 19; Romans 12: 11 (see J. P. M. Sweet, pp. 248, 256).

Comparing the sources

THE three passages are not without their difficulties. Mark 16: 9-20 cannot easily be accepted as part of the original gospel and, therefore, too much importance must not be attached to it. It possibly shows some familiarity with the Acts narrative. Its use of 'new tongues' (v. 17) might well refer to the 'other tongues' of Acts 2: 4, or, more generally, to the gift as it was being experienced in the apostolic church.

Those familiar with the difficulties encountered in harmonising the Acts narrative with the biographical details in the Pauline letters will not be surprised to find similar problems associated with tongues. Luke uses the word 'tongue' in the Acts only six times (in chs. 2, 10 and 19) but not all commentators are agreed that he is describing the same thing each time and there is considerable difference of opinion as to how his description/s compare with those of Paul in 1 Corinthians 12-14. However, the facts that Luke was a companion of Paul and that they both talk about 'tongues' (*glōssai*) should restrain us from distinguishing too sharply (if at all) between their various descriptions.

1 Corinthians is bristling with difficulties for those who were not its original recipients. Unfamiliarity with the Corinthian scene and with Paul's ministry and earlier correspondence make the task of understanding our 1 Corinthians very complicated. John Hurd's *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (London, 1965) well illustrates some of the problems which the modern exegete has to face in unravelling its meaning.

Thus each of the three displays its own peculiar problems. Taken together they are sufficient to inject a note of uncertainty into the most rigorously argued conclusions.

The Acts of the Apostles

LUKE is interested in the work of the Spirit both in his Gospel and the Acts. In his Gospel, apart from Luke 1: 35 (miraculous conception), he always refers to the Spirit in a context of preaching or witnessing (John the Baptist: 1: 15, 16; Jesus: 3: 21, 22; 4: 1, 14, 18, 19 (Isa. 61: 1-2); Disciples: 11: 13; 12: 8-12; 24: 47-49 (*cf.* 3: 16, 17)). In the Acts this perspective remains. It is the preaching of the Kingdom of God that is central to Luke's interests (Luke 16: 16; Acts 1: 3; 8: 12; 14: 22; 19: 8; 20: 25; 28: 23, 31). All of the references to being full of (or filled with) the Spirit describe some singular witness or group of witnesses (Acts 6: 3, 5; 11: 24; 13: 52 (?)) or some singular moment of witness (2: 4; 4: 8, 31; 9: 17-20; 7: 55; 13: 9). The two passages in Ephesians (4: 29-31; 5: 18-20) offer an interesting comparison at this point.

But in the Acts the Spirit's presence is much more intrinsic to the theme of the Kingdom than the above suggests. In Acts 2, 8, 10 and 19 the Spirit is not just the power behind ministries but he is demonstratively present as the sign of the messianic reign of Jesus, the sign of incorporation into his Kingdom, and the sign of apostolic priority in the progress of the gospel. Let us briefly examine each.

1. *The sign of the messianic reign of Jesus:* This is the whole point of Peter's sermon in Acts 2. The apostle's exposition focuses on Psalm 110: 1 and the noteworthy bestowal of the Spirit as evidence of the psalm's application to Jesus (2: 32-36). The well-kept 'messianic secret' of the Gospels is out! Jesus is king and God's messiah is reigning (Peter's proof is three-fold: Jesus' life, his resurrection, and his bestowal of the Spirit). The Kingdom of God is inaugurated and everyone must acknowledge the king (*cf.* Phil. 2: 9-11). Luke aptly closes his apostolic narrative with the words '[Paul] . . . preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered' (28: 31).

2. *The sign of incorporation into his Kingdom:* At Pentecost the disciples ceased being heirs-elect of a coming Kingdom (Luke 12: 32; 22: 29-30) and became confirmed members of an inaugurated Kingdom. In Acts 8 (Samaritans), 10 (Gentiles) and 19 (Baptist's disciples) each demonstrative moment of Spirit-baptism confirmed that these groups were full members of Christ's Kingdom. That such moments of transition were not negotiated without difficulty is well illustrated in Acts 10 and 11 (notice the surprise in 11: 18). The truth of Galatians 3: 26-29 was far from clear to everyone at the outset.

3. *The sign of apostolic priority in the progress of the gospel:* The apostles belong to the New Testament story in a unique way. They are the appointed witnesses through whom alone we know anything and everything of the Jesus-event. In the Acts they are always present at the demonstrative bestowals of the Spirit (Acts 8, 10 and 19). Thus it is Peter and John who have to complete the work of Philip among the Samaritans (ch. 8) and thus also it is Paul's function (as a belated but authentic apostle—1 Cor. 15: 8-11; Gal. 1: 2) to incorporate the sect of the Baptist into the Kingdom (ch. 19). Every demonstrative Spirit-baptism in the New Testament occurs in association with an apostle. Acts 19 is a particularly striking Lukan confirmation of Paul's own apostolic claim (2 Cor. 12: 11, 12).

In the Acts we have no other description of these demonstrative occasions apart from these pivotal moments in chapters 2, 8, 10 and 19. Apostolic appointees may perform 'signs and wonders' (6: 8; 8: 6, 7, 13) but only the apostles preside at moments of demonstrative bestowal of the Spirit. Further references to Spirit-endowed apostolic congregations in the epistles would only confirm this observation.

With reference to the demonstrative form of the Spirit's presence in Acts 2, 10 and 19 (omitting 8 because of its lack of detail) we may say, first, that the experience of tongue-speaking does not seem to have been directed towards any human audience but rather towards God. Even the mixed multitude of Acts 2: 5-13 'overheard' the choruses rehearsing 'the mighty works of God' (v. 11). It was in response to the bystanders' requests that Peter turned the occasion into an evangelistic proclamation. In Acts 2, 10 and 19 the evidence points in the same direction as Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 14: 2. It was this absence of attention to the audience coupled with the spontaneity of the speakers that probably provoked the comment about drunkenness (v. 13). Second, from the use of 'other tongues' in 2: 4, which were intelligible to the mixed audience, and the brief descriptions in Acts 10 and 19 it is not wholly clear whether the phenomenon was the same on each occasion. The case for 'other tongues' (*heterai glōssai*) applying throughout the Acts (and 1 Corinthians) can be made out very strongly (J. G. Davies, R. H. Gundry, R. G. Gromacki *et al.*) but it would seem more natural to regard the absence of the adjective ('other') in Acts 10 and 19 as indicating that the speakers were using their own language (however unusually). Admittedly Peter's words in 10: 47 and 11: 15 could be taken to mean that the occasions were identical but his words do not demand this construction (see R. Banks and G. Moon, p. 283). The assumption that apart from Acts 2 all tongues occasions are occasions of 'lalling' (non-language vocalisations) would require that (i) Christians in the New Testament clearly practised it, and (ii) 'tongue' had achieved such a fixed meaning in this sense as not to require any elucidation on the part of the author of the Acts. The first requirement leans heavily upon a certain view of 1 Corinthians while the second

is a very risky possibility.

A third and final observation on these chapters in Acts is that while Acts 10: 46 parallels Acts 2: 11 and places Peter in a similar position to those who witnessed the first Pentecost, Acts 19: 6 suggests the double activity of tongue-speaking and prophecy. The connection between these two is quite significant as we shall see.

1 Corinthians

IT would appear that among other things the Corinthians were guilty of attaching too much importance to the experience of tongues. They styled the gift *pneumatika* and its practitioner a *pneumatikos* (see J. P. M. Sweet, pp. 241, 251, 252; D. W. B. Robinson, pp. 49-53). Paul's method of coping with this exaggerated assessment of tongues was (i) to withdraw the distinctive title and replace it with 'gift' (*charisma*), (ii) to give it a low place in the general scale of gifts (1 Cor. 12: 8-10, 28), (iii) to show how all the gifts complement one another (1 Cor. 12: 14-26), (iv) to show its worthlessness without love (1 Cor. 13), (v) to promote the gift of prophecy as more desirable for the body's sake (1 Cor. 14), and (vi) to regulate carefully its use in public (1 Cor. 14: 26-33).

Although many commentators have assumed that it was Corinth's Gentile background that was responsible for the excessive interest in tongues reflected in 1 Corinthians it has been pointed out by T. W. Manson that the local pressure on this particular gift 'came from the leaders of the Cephass party, and was part of the concerted move to instil Palestinian piety and Palestinian orthodoxy into the Corinthian Church' (p. 205). This thesis has the support of J. P. M. Sweet who develops it in some detail and with some success against the view of J. C. Hurd that Paul himself was responsible for the Corinthian imbalance (Sweet, pp. 246-256).

However widespread or limited the phenomenon of tongues might have been in the opening decades of the Christian church Paul's argument seems to indicate that it was not everybody's experience in the church at Corinth. Furthermore, however profitable the experience might be to the individuals who enjoy it it is completely without profit to the Christian assembly unless—by interpretation or translation (see J. G. Davies, pp. 229, 230)—it is rendered equivalent to an exercise of prophecy. There is a strong suggestion in 1 Corinthians 14 that these two gifts had features in common. J. P. M. Sweet is probably correct when he says, 'There is no reason to suppose that the categories were clearly defined; in a state of general excitement and enthusiasm one could pass over into the other, the intelligible into the unintelligible' (p. 248). He adds in a footnote 'PNEUMA and PNEUMATIKOS may well for a time have carried a primary reference to tongues as the most obvious PHANEROSIS of the Spirit; cf. 1 Corinthians 14: 37, ΕΙ ΤΙΣ

DOKEI PROPHETES EINAI E PNEUMATIKOS: tongues and prophecy are the two activities which have just been regulated, so PNEUMATIKOS may be used by Paul here sarcastically as the self-designation of a 'tongue-speaker' (*ibid*). It would seem then that the apostle is aiming to conduct his Corinthian enthusiasts to more beneficial forms of ministry (interpreted tongues and prophecy) in the interests of their own maturity as well as for the obvious benefit of outsiders (1 Cor. 14: 20-25). It is perhaps significant, as Sweet points out (pp. 254-257), that in Romans 12, where Paul returns to the subject of functions and gifts in the Christian body, there is no reference to tongues (unless it is veiled in 12: 11) but rather a strong emphasis on maturity and the works of love. Romans was written from Corinth.

As to the tongue phenomenon itself the data is not wholly clear. What is clear is that the speaker is not aware of what he is saying (i.e. he does not comprehend its meaning) unless he has the additional gift of interpretation (1 Cor. 14: 13, 14). What is also clear is that no hearer can understand either without the gift of interpretation (14: 2, 7-11, 16, 17). Is this unintelligibility due to unfamiliarity with the language used (a foreign language) or to the complete unintelligibility of the vocal sounds (a non-language) or is it due to the manner of delivery (involving spontaneity, excitement and incoherence)? Following the normal meaning of *glōssa* (when not referring to the physical organ itself) as an equivalent of *dialektos* (Acts 2: 6, 11) we would expect the last reason suggested to be the basic one. We say 'basic' because the phenomenon was possibly quite varied and may have involved all three features in different proportions at different times (cf. C. S. C. Williams, p. 63). Paul's *genē glōssōn* (1 Cor. 12: 10, 28) might allow for such variety. The interpreter (or translator) would have to be able to understand the language and idiom of the speaker and be able to construe the meaning of his verbal flux. That such an interpreter could be known in advance (especially with repetition) is not improbable (1 Cor. 14: 27, 28). Stuart D. Currie's fascinating paper 'Speaking in Tongues' lists four possible meanings to the word *glōssa* in Acts and 1 Corinthians. They are: (i) Speaking a human language one has not learned; (ii) Speaking a non-human language; (iii) Uttering a 'dark saying' more enigmatic than 'prophecy' or 'revelation'; (iv) Uttering cadences of vocalisation which do not constitute discourse (our summary above combined ii and iv). The surviving post-New Testament evidence shows no traces of (i), (ii) and (iv). (iii) possibly continues in Montanism (Eusebius, E.H., V, xvi, 7-10). Currie's researches are in general agreement with our observations above. He concludes, 'If, then, "speaking in tongues" in Corinth meant some kinds of utterance similar to prophecy or revelation but requiring interpretation, uttered ecstatically by one who might or might not be in command of his faculties, the problem the phenomenon posed was a compound problem of order and of discipline. The value of

“speaking in tongues” would appear questionable, its difficulties all too real. In this case the form of the utterance could give no final proof of the validity of what was intended. The question was double: “Is this the way in which the Spirit speaks?” and “Does this disclose what the Holy Spirit, who speaks only of Christ Jesus, might have to say to us?” Events of the second century taught the church a very deep-seated mistrust of messages delivered by one in ecstasy’ (p. 289).

Modern Tongues

THE advocate of ‘tongues’ (‘lalling’) at the present time has a number of problems which he must surmount. First, he must argue against the prima facie impression of the New Testament that New Testament tongues were not just ‘lalling’. Second, whatever its New Testament form, he must estimate its importance against the background of nineteen hundred years of its absence. Third, he must explain why modern lalling can be provoked and learned quite predictably (J. P. Kildahl, pp. 2-4, 74-75; W. J. Hollenweger, pp. 10, 11). Fourth, he must explain the extraordinary differences between interpretations of the same tongue (J. P. Kildahl, pp. 62, 63).

If he can overcome these difficulties and still insist on being the genuine New Testament article, then he must not claim that ‘tongues’ are necessary for the completion of Christian experience or Christian maturity or for the apprehension of Christian truth. 1 Corinthians would militate against all of these positions. Furthermore, he must not equate his experience of tongues with a theology of Spirit-baptism as is so commonly done.

Having said this, let the glossolaliac and the non-glossolaliac face each other with charity and respect and mutually exhort one another to love and good works especially as we see the Day approaching.

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