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SPEAKING IN TONGUES

The Case of the Aladura Churches of Nigeria

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One of the most dramatic features of the story of twentieth century global Christianity has been the rise and expansion of the Pentecostal movement. Wherever the movement is found the subject of speaking in tongues comes to the fore. Pentecostals all over the world consider genuine speaking in tongues¹ as "languages unknown and unlearned by the speaker and for the most part not understood by the hearers either."² Pentecostals differ, however, as to what role speaking in tongues play in worship. Two positions can be identified on this. First, Sundkler writes "Pentecostal churches whether they are lead by Europeans or Africans are definite on the gift of speaking with tongues. The baptism of believers in the Holy Ghost is indicated by the initial physical sign of speaking with tongues, as the Spirit of God gives them utterance."³ Horton supports this when he also writes "it is inconceivable that a supernatural experience like the baptism should exist without a distinctive supernatural evidence. Tongues is that necessary evidence."⁴ These statements clearly support the idea that tongues must accompany baptism in the Spirit.

Although this position on speaking in tongues is the most representative opinion of Pentecostals, others take a less rigorous attitude. T.B. Barratt, for example, would allow the possibility of baptism in the Spirit without glossolalia⁵. Larry Christianson, a Lutheran pastor, stressed strongly the significance of speaking with tongues for personal prayer life and found in it a source of spiritual refreshment but he refused to accept that speaking in tongues is the only sign of the baptism in the Holy Spirit.⁶ But which of these two opinions is most in harmony with New Testament evidence? Does the New Testament show that reception of the Holy Spirit is evidenced by speaking in tongues?

To answer these questions we will examine the the positions found amongst the Aladura Churches of Nigeria. "Aladura" is a term used to describe the indigenous African churches in Nigeria-- so called because of their belief in the power of prayer. Many separate churches such as the Redeemed Church of God and the Cherubim and Seraphim are clustered under this title. Though the Aladura are indigenous they too have been affected by the winds of the Spirit and hold among themselves the two positions that characterise the world Pentecostal community. After briefly surveying the theology and practise of glossolalia among several of the prominent independent churches of West Africa we shall conclude with an examination of the New Testament evidence on the phenomenon. As one who looks at the phenomenon from outside these churches, I shall have to rely upon statements made by acknowledged representative opinion from within these churches.

Speaking in Tongues in the Aladura Churches

A common feature of the worship of the Aladura Churches is speaking in tongues and is considered of some considerable importance by these churches. The Apostolic Faith, the Cherubim And Seraphim⁷, the Redeemed Church of God consider the phenomenon as the only proof of one's reception of the Holy Spirit. This is seen clearly from the fact that all reported incidents of the phenomenon on these churches are associated with the reception of the Holy Spirit. From the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Kaduna has come a report of a Gwari native woman who when possessed by the Spirit would speak unalloyed Yoruba although when 'normal' she could not say a word in that language. I.A. Omoyajowo also reports of a Hausa prophet in the same church who had received no formal education but would give his message in correct English whenever he was possessed by the Spirit.⁸ From the Redeemed Christian Church of God also have come reports of members speaking in tongues on receiving the Holy Spirit. Pastor F.O. Bamisaiye of this church reports of an illiterate Yoruba woman at Ile-Ife, a Madam Ruth, who received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. She spoke in English although she knew no word of English. Rev. Shoyinka of the Apostolic Faith in Lagos considers the phenomenon as the proof to the church that an individual has received the Spirit of God.

The second position that speaking in tongues is not the only proof of one's reception of the Holy Spirit is represented by the Christ Apostolic Church and the Celestial Church. Mr. Shasanmi reports from the Christ Apostolic Church in Itire, Lagos that the church considers the phenomenon as a gift of God and he gives them to individuals as he wishes. This is testified to by some informants. Dr. Ogunsina of the University of Ilorin reported that on the 12th February, 1984 he and his friend, Dr. Akinsoyinn went with some people to clear the site for a new branch of the church at Ibadan. After the clearing they all assembled to pray and there he and his friend received the Holy Spirit but they did not speak in other tongues. Although he claims to have spoken in tongues later, what is clear is that their reception of the Holy Spirit was not accompanied by an immediate speaking in tongues and even now he claims that he has never heard his friend speak in tongues but his friend (Dr. Akinsoyinn) instead has interpreted Dr. Ogunsina ecstatic utterances on several occasions. This shows that though one received the gift of tongues and the other received the gift of interpretation in neither case was it regarded as essential to the reception of the Spirit.⁹

Mr. Owodunni Olunaike of the Anthony Celestial Church in Lagos expressed that speaking in tongues is possible for any individual within the church who can pray with full concentration and is open to this gift of the Holy Spirit. It is notable that the church believes that God will not communicate with them in a language they do not understand. Speaking in tongues is not a sign of one's reception of the Holy Spirit; it means to the church and the individual that they are close to God. It is the vehicle through which God communicates with the church and its

members.

It is clear from the above that the two positions on the phenomenon are found amongst some of the Aladura Churches of Nigeria. Each church holds strongly to its belief. The Redeemed Christian Church of God, for example would never compromise on its position that speaking in tongues is the only sign of the reception of the Holy Spirit, neither would the Christ Apostolic Church consider the phenomenon as none other than one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Speaking in Tongues in the Book of Acts

Which of these positions is tenable in view of NT evidence? Turning to the New Testament, it is noticed that the canonical Gospels do not refer to speaking in tongues. Jesus never spoke of it nor did he promise it to his followers. There is, some would quickly point out, a passage at the end of Mark's Gospel which seems to suggest that Jesus spoke of speaking in tongues:

And these signs will accompany those who believe:
in my name they will cast our demons; they will
speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents,
and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not
hurt them (16:17,18)

Is this an authentic saying of Jesus? Or does it owe its origin to the theology of some within the early church and who later transposed it to the time of Jesus? There is the possibility that this passage was composed and added to some manuscript of the Gospel of Mark sometime in the second century. This would mean that the passage is a probable reflection on the belief of the question of glossolalia in the second century. Moreover, the passage is not found in any Greek manuscript earlier than the fifth century. Furthermore, it was not mentioned by any writer before Eusebius, the fourth century bishop and church historian.¹⁰ We are forced to conclude with with most contemporary evangelical scholars that this long ending of Mark is probably not authentic and one must be wary of basing any Biblical teaching upon so shaky a base. Thus from the Gospel evidence, Jesus did not say anything on the phenomenon. Do we take this as a pointer to the irrelevance of the phenomenon? No. It is possible that the phenomenon was not mentioned in the Gospels for the simple reason that it had not arisen. The act of speaking in tongues under the influence of the Holy Spirit, had not been deemed appropriate to the Christians at that time.

Evidence for this is that in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, speaking in tongues comes into prominence. On three occasions, the phenomenon is mentioned as a manifestation of the presence of the Spirit. These occasions are:

- (1) The Pentecost Story (Acts 2)
- (2) The Conversion of Cornelius and his household
- (3) At Ephesus, when Paul met a group of twelve who had had

John's baptism (Acts 19:1-7)

At the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the sign of the disciples' reception of the Holy Spirit was the fact that they spoke in tongues. Luke's treatment of the incident indicates that he wanted it understood as a miracle of Xenoglossia¹¹ a miracle of speech whereby the disciples spoke languages of which they had no previous knowledge.

They spoke in a foreign tongue, not known and studied by them but intelligible to those with knowledge of the language. Davies¹² and Gundry¹³ argue differently, however. They insist that what occurred in Jerusalem is speaking in **used** foreign languages. But no matter what Luke intended the passage to mean, one thing is certain, the phenomenon was the important sign of the individual's reception of the Holy Spirit. At Cornelius' house, the sign to Peter and his followers that the host and his household had received the Holy Spirit was that they spoke in tongues. (10:48) There is no indication of the language used, but it can be presumed that it was foreign to the speaker. There could have been Jews in Cornelius' household; the listeners were Peter and "believers from the circumcised" i.e. Jews. So what language (foreign?) could they have spoken, to be understood by Peter and his entourage (Jews as well)? Or was evidence of speaking in tongues here, unlike Pentecost, based only on ecstatic behaviour? At Ephesus, Paul met some disciples who had been baptised with John's baptism but had not received the Holy Spirit. He baptised them in the name of the Holy Spirit and laid hands on them at which time they received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues.

In these three instances, speaking in tongues was the external manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Here then is evidence to support the stand that glossolalia is the sign of an individual's reception of the Holy Spirit. To conclude thus would be wrong, for the evidence so far is limited to the Acts of the Apostles. It is necessary to examine the phenomenon in other New Testament writings.

Tongues in the Teaching of the Apostle Paul

Apart from these occurrences in Acts, the only section of the New Testament where glossolalia is discussed, and here in detail, is I Corinthians 12-14. The lack of reference to the phenomenon in the New Testament could suggest that tongue speaking played a relatively minor role in the primitive/early church and that Paul possibly dealt with the phenomenon here (in I Cor 12-14) not because he considered it important in its own right but because it was a problem in the Corinthian church. Evidence of this is that in the two listings of spiritual gifts given in I Cor 12, tongues and its interpretation were mentioned last. In Ephesians 4:11-12 and Romans 12:6-8 there also appear two lists of spiritual gifts and offices; speaking in tongues is not mentioned at all. If "speaking in tongues" was considered an outstanding endowment of the Spirit, it ought to have been specified here.¹⁴

On careful reading of the Corinthian passages, it appears that Paul in his exposition on the concept of glossolalia, gave both a

negative and a positive assessment of it. What was his negative assessment? With the analogy of a "body with many members," Paul advised the Corinthian church that they must not all desire the gift of tongues, since the church will not be a very useful body if every member of it performed exactly the same function. All members of the body of Christ are necessary. This rules out the supposition that the ability to speak with tongues sets a person off from other believers as one who has received a fullness of the Spirit which others have not received. Glossolalia, without interpretation, is to be strongly discouraged in the assembly (14:5-14:19). He observed that there was something childish about this fascination with tongues and urged them: "Do not be children in your thinking, be babes in evil but in thinking be mature(14:20)." Paul also insisted on the rights of the mind (14:14-15). Paul will certainly not agree with any suggestion that an intelligible speech, prayer, and song were in any way less spiritual or give any less evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us than the unintelligible utterances of tongues in which the mind of the speaker is not engaged; he will rather speak five words with his mind in the assembly than ten thousand words in a tongue. Paul's criticism of glossolalia here seems to have been against the phenomenon and its use within the assembly.

One can deduce from I Corinthians 14 something of the confusion and disorder in the Corinthian church. Members of the church intentionally work themselves up into a state of spiritual ecstasy striving to become vehicles of inspired utterance. From this negative assessment, it would be absurd to think that Paul would consider the phenomenon as the only sign of the reception of the Holy Spirit-- a very important aspect of the christian's life.

Paul, however, also gave a positive word about the phenomenon. He wrote that he spoke in tongues a great deal more than all the Corinthians (14:18) and was willing for the Corinthians to experience this charisma (14:5). He valued glossolalia because he considered it a charisma, an inspired utterance; the spirit speaking through him. He also considered it a kind of prayer (I Cor 14:2) and he thought of it also as a speaking the language of heaven.¹⁵ However, despite these good points on speaking in tongues, Paul did not consider it as the only sign of an individual's reception of the Holy Spirit. From this estimation, speaking in tongues was in no way more important than the other gifts of the Holy Spirit like prophecy, teaching, healing, etc; speaking in tongues does not put an individual any higher spiritually than others who possess other gifts of the Holy Spirit. The church would not be a properly functioning body if all members were to possess one particular spiritual gift.

Conclusion

After the Acts episodes, we do not read of any individual or group of worshippers whose reception of the Holy Spirit was evidenced by their speaking in tongues. This could not mean that the Spirit ceased to indwell Christians. Here we will draw attention to Paul's own case. In Acts 9:17-18 it is not

categorically stated that he spoke with other tongues when he received the Holy Spirit. Thus, there is evidence even in the early chapters of Acts that speaking in tongues was not the exclusive sign of the reception of the Holy Spirit. It would seem, therefore, that the Aladura Churches which teach it is possible to receive the Holy Spirit without speaking in tongues are more in step with the Spirit of the New Testament. The message for the Church in Africa as a whole is clear-- let us not grieve the Spirit by exalting tongues as the mandatory sign of the Spirit's indwelling.

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- 1 Speaking in tongues refers to a language mostly unintelligible, non-cognitive utterance which may vary in sound from inarticulate to articulate. Occasionally, some words which are recognisable may interrupt the flow of incoherence. There may be exceptional cases where intelligible utterances may have all the stress and intonational features associated with glossolalia. To the speakers it is a real language with religious significance.
- 2 C.G. Williams **Tongues of the Spirit**, (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1981) 78.
- 3 B.G.M. Sundkler **Bantu Prophets in South Africa** (OUP, 1976) 247f. See also Williams, 76.
- 4 H. Horton **What is the Good of Speaking in Tongues?**(Assemblies of God Publication House n.d.) 8.
- 5 See Williams, 76.
- 6 W.J. Hollenwager, **The Pentecostals** (1972) 10.
- 7 The Cherubim and Seraphim Church is divided on this issue of speaking in tongues. Some allow it while others don't.
- 8 J.A. Omoyajowo **Cherubim and Seraphim: The History of An African Independent Church** (NOK Publishers: Lagos, 1982) 137.
- 9 Information given here was collected by Miss Beatrice Asere, a final year student of the University of Ilorin (1983/84).
- 10 E. Schweizer **The Good News According to Mark** (London, SPCK, 1979) 374.
- 11 Williams, 25. See also D. Walker, **The Gift of Tongues and Other Essays** (Edinburgh, 1906) 3.
- 12 J.G. Davies, "Pentecost and Glossolalia," **Journal of Theological Studies** 5 1952, 228-31.
- 13 R.H. Gundry, "Ecstatic Utterance," **Journal of Theological Studies** 17, 1966, 228-31.

14 An objection has been raised against this position by Prof. G.N. Stanton who pointed out that this must not necessarily be if both lists in Romans and Ephesians are concerned with service gifts. But the question is -- can speaking in tongues not be regarded as a service gift? With interpretation, it can be used for edification of the church.

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See J.D.G. Dunn **Jesus and the Spirit** (1975) 243f. where he discusses the question; did Paul think of glossolalia as a language? His conclusion is here stated.