

The Philosophy of Speaking in Tongues as a Manifestation of The Holy Spirit: Revisiting the Phenomena of Glossolalia in The Book of Acts

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ABSTRACT

The gift of speaking in tongues has been misunderstood philosophically. Using exegetical and contextual hermeneutics, this study examined the three occurrences of speaking in tongues in the book of Acts. The exegesis shows that speaking in tongues was one of the signs to accompany the disciples when they received the Holy Spirit. This gift was promised specifically in the context of evangelism. The "act" does not mean vain blabbing but speaking clearly in a foreign language. Its manifestations in Acts 10 and 19, is a symbol of acceptance of the Gentile community. Moreover, those who received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19) did not only speak in tongues but also prophesied. Therefore, the philosophy that assumes speaking in tongues as the sign that one has received the Holy Spirit is baseless. Additionally, glossolalia as claimed by Pentecostals today is contrary to what is seen in the Acts.

Keywords: speaking in tongues, glossolalia, Holy Spirit, prophecy

INTRODUCTION

It is colloquial that speaking in tongues is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It was given to the apostles on the day of Pentecost. This gift was evidently bestowed on three occasions whenever the Holy Spirit was upon the believers in the New Testament Church (Acts 2:8, 10:46, 19:6). From these three occurrences in the book of Acts, it is inevitable to ask the question: was speaking in tongues just the manifestation of the Holy Spirit considering its occurrences in the book of Acts? Or was it the very phenomenon to show that one has truly received the Holy Spirit? Although this became a problem in the Corinthian church later in the life of the early church, it is an enormous enigma among Christians as it is dubbed, a sign that one has received the Holy Spirit.

Another perplexity that has become predominant is the "act" on its own. Does speaking in tongues mean vain blabbing or speaking what others cannot understand or a heavenly language as people explain? What does Glossolalia really mean? What was it in the Acts? And what should it be today? Does the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and its sign differ in today's Christian church? Was it an outward sign for the presence of the Holy Spirit? These questions prompted this study which looks at the term Glossolalia in the book of Acts, taking into consideration the three occurrences of speaking in tongues as regard the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and then its relevance and implication.

GLOSSOLALIA: ORIGIN AND USAGE

The word "*glossolalia*" is a compound word which comes from two Greek words "*glossa*" "*glwsa*" and "*lalia*". *Glossa* is defined by the Thayer's (2000) Greek-English Lexicon as the tongue, a member of the body, an organ of speech, a tongue, that is to say, the language and *lalia* as talk, dialect, or mode of speech. *Glossolalia*, "*Glwssolalia*" as implied in the Bible is seen as a technical term used to explain speaking in tongues. Wayne Grudem (1994) sees it as "speaking in languages" instead of tongues (which is more popular). Moreover, in the Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, (Gerald, 1993), this word is seen as an Anglicized version of the terms used in explaining the act of tongues.

Of its origin, Gerhard Hasel (1994) notes that Jesus Christ was the first person to make use of the phrase "speaking in tongues". This is seen in Mark. 16:17: "and these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues" it is significant to note that this was promised in the context of evangelism. Hasel (1994) states that this sign made by Jesus was not the only sign to accompany the evangelists who were commissioned to preach the Gospel; the other sign was casting out demons all in the context of evangelism. It is appropriate to note that speaking in tongues was the media for evangelism on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41).

Glossolalia or speaking in tongues is used to describe an act of speaking in another language different from the one who is speaking is aware of. Hasel (1994) sees it as speaking a language which is new to the speaker and which had not been acquired by normal circumstances. The term is also used however to describe a spiritual gift and fulfilment of the latter rain as promised in Joel 2:28-29. Noorbergen (1973) submits that speaking in tongues is used to describe speaking in known languages; on the contrary, Grudem (1994) sees it as syllables not understood by the speaker. These are the ways *glossolalia* is being used both in the Bible and by modern scholars.

THE MANIFESTATION OF THE SPIRIT IN ACTS 2

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus promised to send the Comforter in John 14:16-17, a promise which was to fulfill Joel's prophecy of the former and later rain (Joel 2:23, 28). Jesus was only re-echoing that prophecy and His last words to His disciples were "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Act 1:8). It is on this note that we base our premise to say that the Holy Spirit which was promised was later poured out on the disciples on the day of Pentecost. However, it is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit that is the focus of this study. In discussing the manifestation, Hasel (1994) opines that the celestial visitation which was not only audible but visible was characterized by the rushing wind and the tongues of fire which rested on the heads of the disciples are emblems of the Holy Spirit.

This fact is echoed by Witherington (1998), but he comments that those emblems may not have been real wind or fire, because Luke says in Acts that they were "like". Whether or not this is true, the Bible gives that these emblems and its manifestation was a quick reaction or a spontaneous gift of speaking in tongues (cf. Acts 10:46, 19:6). Grudem

(1994) states that the manifestation of the Holy Spirit was not limited to speaking in tongues, but to miracles, preaching and various kinds of ministry. This manifestation is permanent and it comes sometimes in different manifestations. Witherington (1998) states this by saying that "a person who already has been filled with the spirit can receive a fresh filling for some specific task or proclamation." From the above, it can be garnered that the manifestation of the Holy Spirit was seen in two emblems as fire and wind. While the Holy Spirit is present in an individual, the individual can be said to possess certain gifts which are given on His bestowal, such gifts as speaking in tongues, preaching, prophecy, just to mention a few. The various ways and means in which glossolalia were manifested in the Bible, and reasons for each manifestation (The Holy Bible Acts 2:1-13) is examined. From the account in Acts 2, Luke significantly shows that the immediate effect of the Holy Spirit's coming on the disciples was glossolalia, that is, speaking in different languages. Barnes (Nd) argues that they were filled by the Holy Spirit, that is to say, they were under His control, influence and power and as the Spirit gave them utterance. Barnes (Nd) opines that the disciples were actually speaking in tongues when he states that:

"It is possible that some of them might have been partially acquainted with the Greek and Latin, as both of them were spoken among the Jews to some extent; but there is not the slightest evidence that they were acquainted with the languages of the different nations afterwards specified".

He continues further in his commentary and states some points concerning this phenomenon in Acts 2. These points include:

1. This ability was predicted in the Old Testament, (Isaiah 28:11), "With another tongue will he speak to this people."
2. It was predicted by the Lord Jesus that they should have this power (Mark 16:17), "These signs shall follow them that believe--they shall speak with new tongues."
3. The ability to do it existed extensively and long in the church. 1 Co 12:10-11, "To another diverse kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: but all these worketh that one and the self same Spirit;"
4. It was very important that they should be endowed with this power in their great work.
5. One design was to establish the gospel by means of miracles. Yet no miracle could be more striking than the power of conveying their sentiments at once into all the languages of the earth. When it is remembered what a slow and toilsome process it is to learn a foreign tongue, this would be regarded by the heathen as one of the most striking miracles which were ever wrought in the establishment of the Christian faith (I Corinthian 14:22,24-25).
6. The reality and certainty of this miracle is strongly attested by the early triumphs of the gospel. That the gospel was early spread over all the world, and that, too, by the Apostles of Jesus Christ, by men of Galilee, is the clear testimony of all history. They preached it in Arabia, Greece, Syria, Asia, Persia, Africa and Rome. Yet how could this have been effected without a miraculous power of speaking the languages used in all those places?

Matthew Henry (Nd) who sees this manifestation as a miracle says that the immediate effect of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was speaking in tongues. He observes that "they began to speak with other tongues, besides their native language, though they had never learned any other. They spoke not from any previous thought or meditation, but as the Spirit gave them utterance; he furnished them with the matter as well as the language" . He assumes that their conversation was not common but heavenly, "they spoke not matters of common conversation, but the word of God, and the praises of His name, as the Spirit gave them utterance, substantial and weighty sayings, worthy to be had in remembrance". He further asserts that those who spoke those languages were also able to understand.

Concerning the nature of the tongues, Hasel (1994) has a different opinion. Attributing it as a gift, he states that this gift is not a learned experience but rather a gift of the Holy Spirit. He goes further to state that the term "apophtheggesthai" was used by Luke to explain the manner in which this glossolalia occurred. It means to speak out clearly and with emphasis, or boldly. Hasel (1994) also states that "tongues" was also used to explain languages, and that the disciples actually spoke other languages as evidenced in Acts 2:7 where the people were amazed that others foreign to their language were spoken and made sense. Consequently, there should be a purpose for providing this gift of the speaking in tongues. The purpose of the gift of tongues was to provide the communicators means of evangelization of the world through the proclamation of the gospel ...the gifts of tongues as manifested through the Holy Spirit reveals that by means of this audible gift of communication, the church has become worldwide (Hasel, 1994).

In Acts 10:46, another manifestation of speaking in tongues is seen. In fact, it is the third time it is mentioned after Mark 16 and Acts 2. As Peter was preaching in the house of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and his household and they started speaking in tongues. This phenomenon in Acts 10 is seen by Hasel (1994) as a semblance to that in Acts 2. Both in bestowal and nature of its effect, therefore, he proposes some links between these two phenomena:

1. Both groups were believers.
2. The Holy Spirit fell suddenly on both groups.
3. Both groups experienced the same outward manifestation of speaking in tongues.
4. Both groups spoke for God and what he had done.
5. Both groups function in major cities in which there were populations of differing language barriers.

As for the purpose, Hasel (1994) states that the bestowal of this gift upon the Gentiles "served as an irrefutable outward sign for Jewish Christians of God's acceptance of the Gentiles on an equal basis, especially since the Holy Spirit was bestowed on believers only". This fact is also supported by Matthew Henry (Nd) who states that the six, who were Peter, were astonished at the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles as they were not circumcised or even baptized yet, but God gave this to break barriers. For the third time, speaking in tongues appear in Acts 19:1-6. This time as Hasel (1994) mentions, is in Ephesus a city in Asia Minor not in Palestine or Jerusalem with Paul as the key personal experience. Paul had visited Ephesus once in his missionary journey but on this

one, he baptized them and after he laid his hands upon the believers there, they received the Holy Spirit, spoke in tongues and prophesied a new gift (Acts 19:1-6). This account is similar to the one in Acts 10 where the bestowal of the Holy Spirit came through an apostle. Here, Paul lays his hand and as Matthew Henry mentions it, he prays for the Holy Spirit. The only difference that should be mentioned here is that they prophesied. This is quite explained by Henry who notes that "they had the Spirit of prophesy, that they might understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God themselves, and the gift of tongues, that they might preach them to every nation and language". He earlier explains that it was given to the twelve which Paul found as a way to prepare them for ministry. As to this phenomenon, Hasel (1994) affirms that the prophecy and speaking in tongues were not ecstatic experiences as suggested in modern Christianity today. Having quite explained this, one question that may still be left is, does the manifestation of the Holy Spirit always involve speaking in tongues as seen in the three instances given above?

GLOSSOLALIA AS EVIDENCE FOR THE BESTOWAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

There is proof to state that an effect or evidence that follows the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is speaking in tongues. One can state emphatically that with the accounts in Acts 2, 10 and 19, glossolalia is an evidence to show the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This fact is echoed in charismatic churches and experiences whether true or false are told. Noorbergen (1973) tells of a story of a notable Methodist minister who left his congregation for three days and on return was accosted by a church member who confessed that the evidence of the bestowal of the Holy Spirit was speaking in tongues (they had been in prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the three days of his absence and people who were receiving the Holy spirit spoke in tongues). The reluctant preacher laid his hand on the lady and offered a simple prayer which was followed by a "follow of syllables" which neither of them understood. In dealing with this knotty paradox, Hasel (1994) emphatically states that "the New Testament lacks support for the contention that the evidence for the bestowal of the Holy spirit is speaking in tongues. He supports these arguments by looking at the following scenarios: the 3,000 who were baptized at Pentecost (Acts 2:41), the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:38-39), Peter before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8), and Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:55).

People are of the opinion that speaking in tongues mean talking with angels, speaking in a language not known by the speaker or they are heavenly languages. Well, to answer this question, What about glossolalia today? It is evident to make a summary of the whole argument stated in this research as it concerns the book of Acts. Before that, Noorbergen's (1973) idea on what glossolalia looks like today will be very helpful. He identifies the use of speaking in tongues today in his second book of glossolalia as gibberish. Gibberish means an incoherent, non-intelligible speech, a series of non interpreted glossal noises, not languages, unknown to hearers and even speakers, a heavenly language. As against glossolalia, to him, people tried making a distinction between glossolalia and a normal language. In his opinion, glossolalia which is a spiritual utterance by the Holy Spirit comes without rules, not from one's mind but from the Holy Spirit's mind. But on the contrary, Noorbergen (1973) notices that people placed the native tongue as humanly propelled. It

is from the mind, words are made by choice, inflections and statements colour one's personality. On the other hand Hasel (1994) notices that glossolalia is attached to the pentecostalists and charismatists who see glossolalia as a "non-ordinary speech behavior that is institutionalized as a religious ritual in numerous western and non-western religious communities". He also notices that speaking in tongues came as a result of studying the Bible concerning the subject of tongues; a result will be glossolalia, or an unintelligible speech. From the forte of this research, it is expedient to note that glossolalia has been misunderstood; therefore, the philosophy of speaking in tongues based on the ubiquity of the above is contrary to what the bible teaches. To react to this, looking at the summary of this research will be very important.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Glossolalia which is used to describe speaking in tongues is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was promised by Jesus in Mark 16:17 and was manifested in Acts. Speaking in tongues is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit which also includes prophecy. Glossolalia is an audible and understandable sign of foreign language to the speaker but understood by the audience, not a gibberish or un-intelligible, ecstatic sounds. This gift was promised in the context of evangelism as seen in Acts 2. Its manifestations in Acts 10 and 19 are a symbol of acceptance of the gentile community. Speaking in tongues as a gift of the Spirit is not given to every believer who receives the Holy Spirit, it could be prophecy or another gift. Based on the strength of the findings of this research, it is unequivocal that the philosophy which assumes speaking in tongues as the evidence that the Holy Spirit has been bestowed on a believer is baseless. It is therefore very essential that every Christian is aware of this and study the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, His gifts and their relevance today.

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