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1-800-611-8080 / www.cgom.org
PO Box 54621, Tulsa, OK 74155-0621

That "Tongues" Question

by James McBride

Is 'speaking in tongues' a true Pentecostal experience?

Years ago I attended a 'revival meeting' - I don't recall the sponsors - at the Lincoln show ground. Frankly, I left before too long as I felt uncomfortable. Because almost everyone was making sounds that simply didn't make sense to me. I figured, of course, that they were 'speaking in tongues'.

Now - I'm a dedicated Bible student and my first experience of this sounded alarm bells. Was I wrong? Was the experience of these sincere folk from God? And has time changed my understanding?

Pentecostal Fire

Since that time the world has been treated to a virtual explosion of 'tongues' and related phenomena in an increasing variety of religious communities - barking, laughing, writhing, 'slain in the Spirit', sticking to the floor etc. But what we have not witnessed is a repeat of what happened on that first Christian Pentecost. That must have been awesome.

There on Sunday morning between nine and ten crowds thronged the streets of Jerusalem headed for the Temple, for they were celebrating the annual 'Feast of Weeks' - Pentecost. There were Jews there from many nations. Suddenly there was a thunderous noise like an approaching tornado that confused its hearers and attracted them to a house where a group of people had gathered.

Then, shockingly, fire came down on the group's heads, dividing equally and 'crowning' each of them. More was to follow. For each member of the gathered crowd heard each of the men speak "in our own language wherein we were born" - Latin, Greek, Arabic. Sixteen different languages are listed (Acts 2). These speakers are branded elsewhere as "unlearned and ignorant"! And they had not, indeed, been pouring over their phrase scrolls in the last six weeks! The account states: "And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues [languages] as the Spirit gave them utterance" (v.4). Nor was tis the only miraculous event, for everyone within earshot heard in their own dialect (v.8) the words spoken.

The speakers were, of course, disciples of Jesus. After his resurrection he had told them to "remain [KJV tarry] in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). No specific mention of the Feast of Weeks, but they gathered on that day anyway as was their custom. Now the power had come, and in a sense this was the birth of the New Testament church.

'Tongues', we see from this account, was the divine gift of being able to speak in a foreign language that had never been learned. The complete 'Pentecost experience' has never been repeated - anywhere.

Gifts of the Spirit

The apostle Paul addresses this tongue speaking (or *glossalalia*) when sorting out the recalcitrant Corinthian church. The brethren there were scrambling to outdo one another by exercising spiritual gifts. Paul (1 Corinthians 14) laid down rules - rules ignored in modern practice, as I had experienced:

all spiritual gifts are inferior to love - the prime fruit of the in-working of the divine Spirit (ch 13)

gifts are divinely dispensed to benefit the whole assembly (ch 12:7)

gifts are dispensed individually by God's sovereign will (ch 12:18) and no-one has all of them (v. 30)

far superior to speaking in an unlearned language is the gift of 'prophecy' - edifying the assembly in words clearly understood (ch 14:19)

the gift of 'tongues' [languages] is not for the benefit of the converted (v. 22)

in public worship those who exercise it are to be limited (v. 27). And are to speak one at a time to avoid confusion

it's public use is permitted only if someone present has the supernatural gift of interpretation (v. 28)

gifts are not spontaneous but are under the control of the individual (ch 14:32f)

That "Tongues" Question

Any individual or church professing to have and promote the gift of speaking in tongues must be judged by these criteria.

'Divine' Oracle

It's a fact that 'speaking in tongues' as widely practiced today is not specifically a Pentecostal or indeed generally Christian phenomenon - it's also exercised in non-Christian religions, and was so in Bible times. It can result from self-induced emotional excitement, aided by fervent song and repetitive speech - 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus... etc'. In some churches members are taught how to 'perform'!

Clearly, as today practised, 'tongue-speaking' in no way reflects the Biblical gift of language but is, likely - however sincerely uttered - no more than an outpouring of emotionally-generated disjointed sounds - sounds which do not conform to any known grammatical structure or language.

It's not unlikely that in Corinth - the only local assembly which he addressed on the subject of speaking in tongues - the apostle Paul was in part dealing with the influence of this aberration. The unruly Corinthians - highly gifted, yet he calls them carnal, immature - were confusing a true spiritual gift with the local pagan worship of Apollo. For a few miles from the city (Corinth was the gateway to it) was the world famous Delphic Oracle where a woman possessed of the 'spirit of Python' - "seized with a certain divine frenzy" - gave drug-induced concocted replies in an incomprehensible babble to questions posed to it. The words spoken by the prophetess were 'interpreted' by 'prophet-priests'.

A Bridge Too Far

Once confined to 'Pentecostals', the practice of 'tongues' has spread like wildfire through most Christian churches. Evangelicals, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, house churches - all have embraced it to some degree. It is seen as a badge of orthodoxy - if you don't 'speak in tongues' could you really be Christian?

The 'charismatic renewal' is seen as a much-needed unifying force for Christendom - a bridge over the troubled waters of doctrinal diversity. Evangelicals and Catholics - once sworn theological enemies - happily worship together, sharing pulpits and hymnals, rolling together between the pews in a

frenzy of barking and hysterical laughter. But one vital principle is studiously ignored.

The Apostolic Faith

Whatever took place at the first Christian Pentecost the results were a far cry from modern charismatic practice. Here's Luke's account, recording Peter's fiery sermon: "Then those that gladly received his word were baptized... and they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine.... Then fear [awe] came upon every soul" (Acts 2:41-43).

That doesn't happen today. The first Christians didn't laugh or crow like hens or bark like dogs. They did not babble incomprehensibly. Those men and women were awestruck. And they listened to - and diligently followed - the apostles' teachings.

The present-day fervour for unity through charismatic worship ignores doctrinal diversity. Through 'inter-faith dialogue' or Alpha courses or massive publicity it returns millions to the confusion of doctrine in the churches from which they come. All are fed the pabulum of traditional religious fable contrary to the plain 'doctrine of the apostles'.

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth - the age-old Word of God. The apostle Paul urges us to be wary: "For if he who comes [ie any teacher] preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted - you may well put up with it" (II Corinthians 11:4). We must constantly be on guard!

The Christians in Berea (Acts 17:11) were commended for their diligent awareness: "...they received the 'word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures [all they had then were the writings of the Old Testament!] daily whether these things were so".

Time after time the Bible warns, explains, counsels all who profess Jesus Christ to study - and follow - the doctrines of the apostles. They became the infallible irreplaceable mouthpiece for the ascended Jesus.

If you consider yourself to be Christ's you must answer to Him - not your church's leader or its traditional teachings - for your belief and practice.

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