

Glossolalia

(Speaking in Tongues)

A child asks his mother a question about some Christians he observed speaking in an unintelligible language during worship. The conversation goes like this:

Child: *“How come some people in church speaking so funnily like crazy talk when they pray?”*

Mother (not herself familiar with the subject of glossolalia):
“Don’t ask so much. Have you not learnt that curiosity killed the cat?”

Child: *What was the cat curious about, Mummy? My kindergarten teacher told us it is good to be curious. Teacher said many people’s achievements started with their curiosity.*

On the subject of glossolalia, should one be curious or not? Even if curiosity would kill the cat; I believe that when tongue-speaking is in manifestation before a gathering, curiosity will be stirred. To some, it may just be a passing interest; while to others, the desire to seek more understanding and to “go for the experience” may turn out to be either spiritually a blessing (of edification) or jeopardy (of spiritual disillusionment due to misconception). This is because speaking in tongues as actively encouraged by some Christians (especially the Charismatics) is actually a personal experience between one and God. Not everyone who seeks is promised to receive the gift. This is evident from Scripture. Paul asked the rhetorical question in 1 Cor. 12:30, “Do all speak in tongues?” The answer is obvious.

Some glossolalia crusaders (usually Pentecostals)¹ might argue that tongue-speaking is for all Christians and the tongue mentioned by Paul in his rhetorical question refers not to glossolalia but different human languages, claiming that the phrase “different kinds of tongues” in v. 28 supports this contention. It could be accepted that Paul was indeed talking about different Christians endowed with different public ministry gifts in v.28, but it could also be asserted that Paul, in addressing the Corinthians for the purpose of encouraging their unity as one body of Christ and being on the subject of spiritual gifts did in a natural course of progression in his address move on to examples of gifts of prophecy, healing and speaking in heavenly tongues to illustrate the full spectrum of gifts within the body spanning ordinary and extraordinary spiritual empowerment of the parts making a comprehensive whole that serves Kingdom’s purpose. Significantly, in v. 28 he chose to qualify the word ‘tongues’ with the descriptive “different kinds of” and this was immediately after he mentioned “gifts of administration”. However, when he then moved on to ask the question “Do all speak in tongues?” in v. 30, this was closely following sequential mentions of special blessings like miracles and gifts of healing (“Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing?”) It is clear that “Do all speak in different kinds of tongues?” would be a very different construction from “Do all speak in tongues?” Paul chose the latter construction and it would be remiss for anybody to vary the construction to suit his argument.

¹ The terms ‘Pentecostals’ and ‘Charismatics’ are not synonymous. However, the groups do overlap in their beliefs in tongues. Pentecostals (beginning early 20th Century) are more forceful in preaching their theology on the events on the day of Pentecost narrated in Acts 2, on supernatural healing and on speaking in tongues as evidence of “baptism of Holy Spirit”. Charismatics were groups arising out of a so-called Charismatic renewal around 1960 because of a developing interest in the concept of spiritual gifts (charismata). Charismatics did not align themselves totally with the beliefs of the Pentecostals. This description here about the Pentecostals vs. Charismatics is just general. In ordinary conversations among Christians, the two terms are sometimes used roughly interchangeably. I see that it is only important to differentiate when there is need to go into their deeper theological distinctives.

If you are into seeking the gift of tongues, you may be happy to note that your Christian denominational affiliation is not a pre-condition for God to decide whether to pour the gift on you. You may be a Charismatic, Lutheran, or belong to any other denomination. However, it is also possible that you come into tongue-speaking without being aware, like one experience I would like to share here.

I was a member of a Charismatic Church before I joined the Lutheran Church. I have shared previously my transfer of membership as a result of the gradual progress of my key involvement with the newsletter ministry in Bedok Lutheran Church (BLC), and so I wish for no misunderstanding that it was due to any issue with my first church. I remember there was this occasion when I attended a Christian gathering in town with a brother from BLC. I vaguely remember that it was DBS auditorium but I can't recall whether it was before or after the event when there was a spiritual possession case. I was quite brave in stepping forward to join other Christians in the laying of hands on the afflicted individual. After some time of prayers, everything was back to normal and so I left with the brother. Then, the brother asked me, "Do you know that just now you were speaking in some unknown tongue?" I was quite surprised because I wasn't aware. Throughout the time of laying of hands, I felt quite normal. On hindsight, it was an experience of God's unction without me being actively aware of, and it was in the context of praying against evil rather than a manifestation in worship and praise. It was also not the result of a direct seeking for the 'gift'. There was also once a night session in BLC when some foreign ministers were the invited guests and there was tongue-speaking involved with the approval of the church. So I am not a stranger with glossolalia. I do feel comfortable when I am in the midst of others who speak in tongues even if I do not personally join in the tongue-speaking. My experience tells me that one may be aware or unaware when speaking in tongues. Occasionally, I still visit my first church, which is doing quite well. Praise God!

If you care to observe congregations of Charismatics, not everyone possesses this spiritual gift. It also seems to be that it is easier for a believing Christian to receive the gift of speaking than the gift of

interpreting tongues. The vast majority of Charismatics who share about speaking in tongues do not have the gift of interpretation. Could this perhaps be due to the fact that ministers who encourage tongue-speaking are not as active in encouraging congregation members in seeking the gift of interpretation? It is not sensible to make the case that God is more interested in dispensing the gift of speaking than that of interpreting. Whatever be the reason, there is an obvious imbalance in the prevalence or popularity of tongue-speaking and tongue-interpreting even though the latter is equally if not more important than the former. Such importance is raised by Paul in 1 Cor. 14:27, “If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.” If there is any argument over whether the phrase “a tongue” refers to a foreign language or a Spirit-inspired utterance of a heavenly language, the same uncertainty also applies to the phenomenon described in Acts 2:1-4 (on day of Pentecost), as biblical scholars have variously interpreted the “other tongues” (Acts 2:4) as either real foreign languages or Spirit-inspired unintelligible utterances. Whatever be the correct interpretation², the tongues were intended to be understood, as God did enable the concomitant miracle of having the crowd hear the tongues, each person in his own language. (v. 6) So there is a unity between Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians and the happening on the day of Pentecost – the tongues were to be grasped. It is thus scripturally supported that tongue-speaking (whether it is a human language or an unintelligible heavenly language) when it gushes from our mouths for audience hearing ought to have interpretation (be understood). By 1 Cor. 14:28, if there is no interpreter, the speaker would do better to keep the tongue-speaking quietly to himself and God for the sake of orderly worship. (cf v.13) This does not amount to

² The word ‘tongues’ in Greek (transliterated) is *glossa*, same in Acts 2 (in connection with Pentecost) as well as in over 40 occurrences elsewhere in Acts and other books of the Bible (Mark, Luke, Philippians, Romans, James, Revelation, 1Cor, 1John), with various meanings including the organ in the mouth (e.g. 1 Pet 3:10 & James), a language of speech (e.g. a foreign language) and a heavenly vocal utterance that is humanly unintelligible. So it is understandable the difficulty sometimes encountered to place the exact meaning at an occurrence of the word even with the best effort in studying the context. Therefore, ambiguity cannot be totally eradicated. Ambiguity begets debates.

a denial of tongue-speaking *per se*, but it does tell us something about how one should handle the gift.

While there is no claim of wrongdoing for a Christian to seek the gift of glossolalia, caution is advised against anyone seeking with the wrong attitude whereby he becomes spiritually dejected when not granted his wish for the gift. In the first place, is the gift essential or not? My understanding is that most Charismatics regard tongue-speaking as a privilege, not a pre-requisite for salvation. **In Singapore, the National Council of Churches is a body that has as members Charismatics and non-Charismatics. There is peace within the body with members accepting one another as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.** If this is so, what then is the big deal over the seeking of the gift? Let's refer to the Bible:

1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

2 For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.

3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified. (1 Cor 14:4-5)

It is evident that notwithstanding the desirability of spiritual gifts, desirability is not the be-all and end-all of Christian living. Significantly, while Apostle Paul advocates the seeking of spiritual gifts in v. 1, he does not bring out the speaking in tongues as primary for Christians to pursue. While he acknowledges the edification value of tongues in v. 4, he speaks in the same breath the contrast between self-edification (by speaking in a tongue) and church-edification (by prophesizing), clearly intimating the latter's superiority over the former. Note that this is further reinforced in v. 5 when he states unequivocally – firstly, the greater worth of prophesying

compared to speaking in tongues; and secondly, the importance of interpretation to go with speaking in tongues (the point I have dwelled on, two paragraphs above). Reading verses 4 & 5 as a whole, one cannot miss the fact that tongue-speaking by itself (without interpretation) edifies self but not the church, and the Apostle would rather have Christians place importance of church over self.

Self-edification is a reason for seeking the gift of glossolalia, but not a compelling reason. Perhaps, speaking in tongues gives Christians some spiritual lift. This lift would be valuable if it is applied in the Lord's humble service to spread blessings across the church. **If God by His grace grants you the gift (even if it is in your private time with Him) to give you a spiritual lift, it is not meant for you to boast of your spiritual superiority but for you to serve more and better. Otherwise, what is the use of the lift?** I know (with admiration) tongue-speakers who are great in personal testimony of holiness (limited only by the fact that "all have sinned and come short of God's glory"), and (with sadness) those at the opposite extreme of being rather poor witnesses for Christ by their out-of-church conduct. (Of the latter group, I wonder what good the edification does.) It is not difficult to find examples. Generally, in both groups (tongue-speakers and non-speakers), Christians of the same range from 0 – 10 in faithfulness to God's Word and diligence in servanthood to Christ can be found. God confers the gift of glossolalia for edification or whatever purpose associated with His glory's sake, not for one to do the "I am more spiritual than thou" or "My prayers are more likely to be answered than yours" kind of show.

In being curiously enquiring or enthusiastically seeking the gift, one must also be careful to ensure that he falls on the blessed side and not the jeopardy side in the end result. Pentecostals often cite Mark 16:17 as the evidence for every Christian to speak in tongues,

"17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues;"

Cognizant of the principle of proper scriptural interpretation, I do not feel secure to regard v. 17 in isolation from the next one that closely follows

(accompanies) it in a continuous (connected) passage, and then impute to it a held opinion. The next verse says,

18 they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." (Mk 16:17-18)

Essentially, verses 16 & 17 form one continuous discourse, the two verses separated only by a semi-colon. I do not need to enter into a discussion of grammar and punctuation. By common sense, it is impossible to claim that the whole discourse (rather than a particular choice verse) says one thing without saying another. Truth is that the discourse says that the believers will not only speak in tongues, but also drive out demons, drink deadly poison, etc. Obviously, a lot of work has to be done to do a good contextual interpretation of the message. We can leave this to Bible scholars; suffice me now to say that it is not entirely convincing to extract a small portion of the discourse to support an unequivocal stand, "See, this is what the Bible says about believers and speaking in tongues!"

Arguing against "curiosity kills the cat," a popular rejoinder is "satisfaction brings it back." For a cat with nine lives, it is ok; but for man, once he loses his one life to the wrong guidance (like what Matt. 24:24 warns about), then the satisfaction of curiosity will not bring it back. Here are a few points from Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossolalia>):

- 1. The modern Christian practice of glossolalia is often said to have originated around the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States.*
- 2. Glossolalia has also been observed in shamanism and the Voodoo religion of Haiti.*
- 3. Aside from Christians, certain religious groups also have been observed to practice some form of theopneustic glossolalia.*

4. *Some Christians practice glossolalia as a part of their private devotions; some accept and sometimes promote the use of glossolalia within corporate worship.*
5. *The controversy over tongues is part of the wider debate between continuationists who believe that glossolalia has a role to play in contemporary Christian practice, and cessationalists and dispensationalists who believe that all miraculous gifts, including glossolalia, featured only in the time of the early church*

Looking at #1 and #5 above, there was a gap between the time of the Apostles (early church) when tongue-speaking was practised and the time at the beginning of the 20th Century (i.e., the birth of Pentecostalism) when the "modern Christian practice" originated. This is one of the reasons for controversy. Is this tongue the same as that tongue? Whether same or not, it is impossible for us to categorically deny that God is able and willing to manifest the spiritual gift with similarity or difference among His people any time. However, I have the inclination towards the idea that a true tongue is possible for interpretation by specific individuals with the gift of interpreting tongues or by the Holy Spirit's miraculous enabling. (Note the mention of interpretation closely following the mention of speaking in different tongues in 1 Cor. 12:10, apart from what I have discussed above on interpretation.) Roughly speaking, it is like saying that a true foreign language that we don't comprehend can be interpreted by those who have the ability to interpret, whereas a person who feigns a foreign language will be such that what he speaks is simply gibberish without possibility of interpretation. Unfortunately, if someone speaks a true foreign language that we don't comprehend and no interpreter is around, how can we tell whether it is true or false? Is telling by observed outcome 100% reliable? It has even been claimed that tongues can be faked although, personally, I have not come to know of any phony case.

Glossolalia does carry a mysterious allure. (*“For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.” 1 Cor 14:2*) It is understandable if different members of the church share different levels of comfort and discomfort with the debate. On one hand, we as God’s subjects have no *locus standi* to object to such a spiritual manifestation that is true. On the other hand, like anything else that the church faces up to in a world of sinfulness, we have to be suitably guarded against inroads of pretensions. Isn’t it the warning of Scripture for us not to believe every spirit, “but test the spirits, whether they are of God ...” (1 John 4:1)? I see true tongue-speaking as a manifestation by God's will and it does not require deliberate human effort to propagate. If it is God's will for more of His people to display the gift, or even the gift of interpretation of tongues, we can do nothing about it. However, as a fallible person everyone is, it is always better to be circumspect that we may not always sense the clarity of whether a particular tongue is true work of the Holy Spirit, an imitation or pretension.

Given the global nature of church debate on this subject, especially in the context of the church being in the end days, I humbly admit that I cannot profess having the last word on it. To each Christian his prayerful and meditative contemplation with reference to Scripture for guidance. Bearing in mind Timothy 3:16, let our understanding of the subject fit what Scripture says and not vice versa. Do not forget that the body is a unit and that we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body, “whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free.” (1 Cor. 12:12-13) I see no wrong to add this: Regardless of whether we speak in tongues or not.

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4 – 7 June 2009
at Harris Resort
in Batam