



A Comparison of Glossolalia in Acts and Corinthians

By: Melvin Ho

The purpose of this article is to examine and analyze teaching on tongues in 1 Corinthians 12–14, and to compare it with the description in the Book of Acts. The aim of such a comparison is to demonstrate that the views the Holy Spirit expressed through Paul and Luke are similar in substance and complementary in their distinctives.

Challenges To Glossolalia

Much of the controversy about tongues in the past has centered on the validity of tongues as a subsequent experience for the believer in connection with the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The rejection of Pentecostalism was usually based on anti-supernaturalistic presuppositions and naturalistic grounds.

Presently the challenge to glossolalia has shifted from the anti-supernaturalistic rejection of the phenomenon to a more sophisticated and subtler form: its theological and biblical validity.

Some people accuse Pentecostals of neglecting Pauline evidence and of constructing their theology on inferential evidence rather than scriptural statements. In other words, they claim Pentecostals employ passages in Acts on the sheer basis of precedent in order to build a doctrine of the initial evidence of tongues to support their experience. To augment their position they advance the following arguments:

1. Luke is not a theologian in his own right. Only when Paul reinforces Lucan implications is there the possibility of a Lucan Pentecostal theology.
2. Critical Lucan Pentecostal narratives in Acts cannot be used to support or establish tongues as initial evidence because it cannot be demonstrated that those Pentecostal narratives disclose a clear Lucan intentionality to teach theology.
3. For historical precedents to have didactic merits, they must be taught elsewhere in Scriptures in a passage that is clearly didactic.
4. Acts points to a repeating pattern but not a normative experience. Thus, speaking in tongues may be normal, possibly desirable, but it cannot be proclaimed as a normative model.

Other people claim glossolalia in Acts does not correspond to that in 1 Corinthians 12–14; and since it differs in significance and purpose from Corinthians, glossolalia in Acts 2,8,10,19 is distinct from the latter and is an inclusion sign indicating the believers were baptized into the Church. It was a temporal inclusion-inaugural sign that had no repetition beyond Acts. As evidence they argue:

1. The glossolalia of Acts 2,8,10,19, involved the entire group while the gift of tongues was the possession of a few individuals. In 1 Corinthians 12:30, “All do not speak with tongues, do they?” (NASB) contrasts with “all” spoke in tongues at Pentecost and Caesarea (Acts 2:4; 10:44), and it is implied that all did in Samaria and Ephesus (8:16,17; 19:6,7).
2. Glossolalia in Acts is sovereignly given whereas the gift of tongues is exercised at the will of the recipient. In 1 Co-

inthians 14:27 the gift was to be used in public at the will of the speaker, and the gift is subservient to the will of the speaker.

3. Glossolalia in Acts requires no interpreter. Foreign languages are clearly recognized, and the context of the message was one of praise to God (Acts 2:11; 10:46; 11:15). In Corinthians the exercise of the gift of tongues depends on an interpreter being present (1 Corinthians 14:28).

4. Glossolalia in Acts is inaugural and temporal, but the gift of tongues is an age-abiding charismatic gift in the church.

The central reason why some reject tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is that Pentecostal theology is based on precedents in Acts and according to this is questionable. They hold that doctrine cannot be built upon historical narrative and that glossolalia in Acts is distinct from the didactic segment in 1 Corinthians.

Paul and Luke on Glossolalia

A close examination of Paul's and Luke's presentation of glossolalia in their respective contexts and a comparison between them will indicate their compatibility, thus justifying the credibility of the Pentecostal position on tongues.

Paul's treatment of glossolalia was basically from a pastoral perspective. He dealt with three particular problems with the Corinthian believers: first, a church lacking in unity but insisting on uniformity in contrast to God's insistence on unity but His being glorified in diversity (1 Corinthians 12:28–30); second, the overemphasis and singular enthusiasm about tongues leading to disorder in worship and to a restrictive view of the spiritual gifts; and third, the misuse of tongues in community worship.

The Holy Spirit through Paul was essentially correcting an imbalance in the use of glossolalia in 1 Corinthians 12–14, thus not condemning the exercise of the gift. This is evidenced by his high valuation of the gift in his own devotional life (14:18,19). He regarded tongues as a legitimate part of worship (14:26) and recognized its value in self-edification (14:28). In fact, he commended the giving of thanks in tongues (14:17), encouraged the Corinthians to keep on speaking in tongues (14:5), and instructed the church not to forbid tongues in the church (14:39).

In correcting the imbalance, Paul contrasted the use of tongues for private edification (14:18) and its use in community worship. He pointed to the limited value of tongues in corporate worship (since utterances in tongues are only understood by God, unless being interpreted), the need for interpretation in public use (14:13), for order (14:40), and for diversity with its inherent richness (14:26). He encouraged them to seek "to excel to the edifying of the church" (14:12), and to recognize the central motivation of seeking what is best for the "body" when they come together.

The Holy Spirit's perspective of tongues through Luke is in contrast largely historical but also theological. He focused on the dawning upon man of the Messianic Age, prefaced by the outpouring of the Spirit and the ushering in of the eschatological kingdom of God. His emphasis was on the initiation of the new age of the Spirit and how an individual can be initiated into this era; the dynamic enabling that marked the expansion power of the earliest church; and the expressive power of the Spirit in the life of the believer.

Luke, therefore, concentrated on the initiatory dimension of glossolalia in contrast and complement to Paul's developmental perspective. He reported that there is a logical distinction, if not always (as experienced by the converts at Pentecost, Samaria, Caesarea, and Ephesus) a temporary distinction, between new birth and baptism in the Spirit. On some occasions, the baptism in the Spirit was virtually simultaneous with conversion. At other times, it was subsequent to conversion.

Paul's main emphasis then is the developmental dimension of the Spirit — the ethical impact or the behavioral results the presence of the Spirit produces. He seems to assume the readers know about the initiation Luke portrays in Acts — the baptism in the Spirit with its accompanying initial evidence of speaking in tongues culminating in an overflowing life in effective service.

The Origin and Source of Tongues

Regardless of the perspectives from which the Holy Spirit prompted Paul and Luke to write, both point to the divine source of tongues. Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 12:11,12, “all these [gifts] worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.” Luke recorded that the disciples spoke in tongues “as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). Paul was inspired to state the same truth Luke did concerning the Spirit being the “promise of the Father.” He wrote, “God [the Father] hath set some in the church . . . [diverse kinds] of tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:28).

Nature of Tongues

Both Paul and Luke stated that speaking in tongues is Spirit-inspired utterance. Thus it is recorded by Luke that the “Holy [Spirit] fell on all of them” (Acts 10:44), and “came on them and they spoke with tongues, and prophesied” (19:6) and magnified God (10:46). Speaking in tongues is also viewed as supernatural communication (1 Corinthians 14:2, Acts 2:11) that is often praise (Acts 2:11, 10:46) and prophetic utterance (19:6). Similarly, Paul described it as “in the Spirit [speaking] mysteries” (1 Corinthians 14:2), blessing God with the Spirit (verse 16), and giving thanks (verse 17).

Contrary to those who argue tongues are gibberish and ecstatic utterances, Luke and Paul state that speaking in tongues is an earthly or heavenly language spoken by the enablement of the Spirit (Acts 2:8–11, 1 Corinthians 13:1). Thus Conzelmann concedes that tongues is more than ecstatic utterance:

Paul presupposes that the inspired man remains master of himself. This is surprising: inspiration surely means transportation, ecstasy. But for Paul the criterion of orderliness is apparently effective not only when it comes to the content of the inspired speech, but already in the case of the phenomenon itself.¹

It is only in the distinction between tongues in the gift of the Spirit and tongues as a gift of the Spirit that one finds a basic difference between Acts and First Corinthians. The former emphasized tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, while the latter defined the term as a ministry grace to the individual and the body.

Purpose of Tongues

Even with regard to the purpose of tongues, there are various strands of similarity between First Corinthians and Acts. One of the commonalities shared by Paul and Luke is the function of tongues as a sign to the unbelievers. Paul pointed out that one purpose of the gift of tongues in public usage is to cause unbelievers and nonbelievers (idiotai) present at its occurrence to realize their alienation from God and as such under divine judgment and eternal damnation (1 Corinthians 14:22,25). However, the gift of tongues serves only as a sign; therefore, proclamation in the hearers’ language is needed to teach them God’s message of salvation and their fallen condition, resulting in their repentance toward God.

What Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 14 is perfectly exemplified by Luke in the historical narrative of the events of Pentecost: tongues as a sign to the nonbelieving or unbelieving audience (Acts 2:4,5), its function in awakening the audience’s awareness of the supernatural or presence of God (verse 6–8,12), the mocking response of the audience (2:13; compare 1 Corinthians 14:23), and the proclamation of the gospel bring divine revelation to the unbelievers’ hearts (Acts 2:14–36; compare 1 Corinthians 14:24,25) leading to repentance (Acts 2:37, compare 1 Corinthians 14:25).

Emphasis

The difference between 1 Corinthians 12–14 and Acts is fundamentally emphasis and perspective. For Paul the motivation of spiritual gifts including tongues is love and the function, to bring edification and spiritual benefits to the local body.

For Luke speaking in tongues is evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit and points irrefutably to a prior genuine regeneration experience. The emphasis in Acts is that tongues is the evidence of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in connection with the “dawning in” of the eschatological kingdom of God, characterizing the universal expansion of the Church.

Conclusion

To say Pauline and Lucan views of glossolalia are not the same is not entirely true, and to insist Luke must find an echo in Paul to display an intentionality to teach is to fail to see the unity and complementary relationship in Paul’s and Luke’s theology of the Spirit.

Essentially what the Holy Spirit teaches through Luke and Paul is that the baptism in the Spirit with tongues as the initial evidence is both a normal and normative experience (Acts 2:4, 1 Corinthians 14:5); the relation between the gift of tongues as a grace and ministry is that of continuum. The former is the initiation of the latter resulting in a growing edification of the body and the expansion of the kingdom of God. Both are vital elements of the process towards the goal of coming into the unity of the faith and arriving at the fullness of the stature of Christ.

Endnote

1. Hans Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 244.

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