



Is Glossolalia Languages?

A Survey of Biblical Data

By: Jon Ruthven

Today there is a great deal of discussion as to the nature of modern glossolalia: Is it a genuine gift of the Holy Spirit, or is it “auto-suggestion, self-induced?”¹ The recent translation of the New English Bible follows the view that glossolalia (1 Corinthians 12 to 14) is best described as “ecstatic utterances,” implying a connection somehow with the ecstatic Greek cults prevalent contemporaneously with the Corinthian church.²

Moffatt is representative of many when he states: “Broken murmurs, incoherent chants, low mutterings, staccato sobs, screams, and sighs, dropped from the speaker’s lips in hurried, huddled utterances. Instead of the mind controlling the tongue, as it did in the more conscious forms of prophetic speech, the tongue appeared to be moved by some spirit which had taken possession of the votary.”³ Moffatt adds, “Such cries sometimes included weird, strange words which sounded foreign. . . . At times the enthusiast actually appeared to be talking some outlandish jargon, if not positive gibberish.”

One thing should be noted in the following attempt to show that the Corinthian glossolalia was not to be confused with the ecstatic gibberish of the surrounding pagan cults. This is an attempt to demonstrate that since Corinthian glossolalia has found parallels in modern phenomenon (such as its connections with prophecy, reactions of outsiders [1 Corinthians 14:22–24], and abuses) it is possible that the parallel will hold to the assumption that some present instances of glossolalia are genuine human languages. It is not within the scope of this article to consider the possibility of other than human languages (1 Corinthians 13:1) in tongues speaking.

A number of points can be raised in support of the view that Paul regarded the glossolalia in Corinth as real languages:

1. Throughout the New Testament and in Greek literature surrounding the New Testament period, tongue refers most frequently to “meaningful human speech.”⁴ Hatch and Redpath (Concordance to the Septuagint) lists glossa as occurring about 30 times throughout the Septuagint in the sense of normal language. Twice the term refers to “stammering” (Isaiah 29:24 and 32:4).
2. In connection with the glossolalia in First Corinthians, the word diemeneuo usually indicates the translation of a language when used in that context. In 21 cases where this word is used in Scripture (LXX and New Testament) — apart from the cases in question — one refers “to satire or figurative saying, two refer to explanation, and 18 to translation.”⁵
3. It is quite apparent that Luke had in mind foreign languages when referring to glossolalia in the Acts (2:6–11). This is especially significant when we remember that Acts records that Paul and Luke were frequent traveling companions, and doubtless discussed this very phenomenon.
4. It is sometimes stated that in 1 Corinthians 14:2, “No man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries,” we have evidence of ecstasy. But we must remember that the term mystery denotes spiritual truth regardless of the mode of communication. “In the Spirit” can also refer to clearly understood prophecy, which is given in one’s native language (1 Corinthians 12:4–11).
5. The unintelligibility of the tongue (1 Corinthians 14:9,14) does not imply “ecstasy” because, when neither the

speaker nor anyone in the assembly has the interpretation, the speaker is urged to pray “that he might interpret.” Paul forbids one to speak in the assembly when there is no one to interpret (1 Corinthians 14:28).

6. Van Elderen⁶ suggests that the frequent use of words with the “lal-” root in connection with glossolalia suggests inarticulate speech because of the connotation of “idle talk or chatter.” But a cursory check of lexica shows that this was not the normal use of this word. Moreover, Paul uses *lego* in connection with glossolalia (1 Corinthians 14:16), a word that does not have this connotation. In the same connection, Paul uses the “lal-” root in 1 Corinthians 14:19 when he is talking of speaking “with the mind,” and again in connection with prophesying in the vernacular (compare 1 Corinthians 14:34).

7. The charge that the disciples were “drunk with new wine” is brought up to suggest that ecstasy is in evidence in the Pentecostal experience as it is in the Corinthian case where Paul warns that glossolalists who are observed by outsiders are thought to be “mad” (1 Corinthians 14:23). But while in the first case the Acts account clearly indicates that languages were spoken (the charge of “madness” likely coming from the extreme joy and the unintelligibility of the languages), we might note that the charge of being “mad” has intriguing parallels in the only other instances where the same word is used in the New Testament. These parallels (and “parallels” of course, are not conclusive) all involve a speaker who delivers a message from God and as a result is deemed “mad” (*mainesthai*).⁷ In each case the “sign” of God’s message is given and the response to the message is a charge of madness.

8. When Paul seems to make a distinction between praying “with the mind” and “with the spirit” (1 Corinthians 14:15), some would suggest that this implies complete loss of control, for example, ecstasy. However, we are faced with the assertion of Paul: “I thank my God I speak in tongues more than ye all” (1 Corinthians 14:18). Some interpreters say that Paul uses *mallon* to mean “more kinds” of languages, where he is distinguishing his languages (Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, and possibly Latin) from the “tongues” (glossolalia) of the Corinthians. But this interpretation would charge Paul with using duplicity.

In that his whole discussion deals with glossolalia, Paul would have to be deliberately equivocating on “tongue,” giving the Corinthians the impression that while he, too, was an exceptional charismatic (exercising a gift which they felt indicative of spiritual superiority, and thereby firmly establishing his right to be “in the ‘in’ group” to address them), he desired that they would become more balanced in their evaluation of the gifts. If Paul was referring to the fact that he spoke natural languages often in prayer, he would really be trying to establish rapport with the Corinthians on deceptive grounds.

Paul also drew a distinction between praying and speaking “in tongues,” and praying and speaking “with my mind” (1 Corinthians 14:14–19, Phillips). The implication of this is obvious: If “tongues” means to Paul “learned languages,” he must draw a distinction between his use of “learned languages,” that is, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, etc., and speaking and praying with “my mind.” He would not be using his mind when using any of his learned languages. This is incredible.

9. That the tongues-speaker was in control of himself is evident from the fact that Paul instructed the Corinthians to speak only with an interpreter present, and to limit the individual utterances to two or three. The parallel statements controlling prophecy and tongues suggest that the statement, “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1 Corinthians 14:32), has analogous truth regarding glossolalia. For further indications that Paul uses glossolalia to mean supernaturally endowed languages, see Gundry.⁸

Today, something is happening in many churches that were nearing a lethargic, frozen death. A new breath of the Holy Spirit seems to be quickening people, giving joy and confidence in the new life in Christ Jesus. While it is recognized that glossolalia is not the only factor in spiritual quickening, great care should be exercised not to exclude what the New Testament recognizes to be a genuine God-given experience. Let us be willing to “judge all things, and hold fast to that which is good.”

Endnotes

1. Robert D. Lindberg, “... Try the Spirits ...,” *Presbyterian Guardian*, XXXIV (Feb., 1965), 22, quoted in Anthony

A. Hoekema, *What About Tongue Speaking?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), 133.

2. Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), s.v. “glossa,” (sec. 3a), and Johannes Behm, “glossa,” *T.W.z.N.T.*, I, 722: “In Corinth ... glossolalia is an unintelligible ecstatic utterance. One of its forms of expression is a muttering of words or sounds without interconnection or meaning. Parallels may be found for this phenomenon in various forms and at various periods and places in religious history.”

3. James Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d.), 208, quoted in Anthony Palma, “Tongues and Prophecy — A Comparative Study of the Charismata,” S.T.M. thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., 1966), 33.

4. Robert S. Gundry, “‘Ecstatic Utterances’ (N.E.B.)?” *Journal of Theological Studies*, XVII, (Oct., 1966), 299.

5. *Ibid.*, 300.

6. Bastian van Elderen, “Glossolalia in the New Testament,” *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, VII, 53ff.

7. John 10:19ff.: “There arose a division again among the Jews because of these words. And many of them were saying, ‘He has a demon, and is insane; why do you listen to Him?’” Compare Acts 12:15 ; 26:24 ; and 1 Corinthians 14:23.

8. Gundry, *op. cit.*, 306f. As evidence of the assertion that Paul sees glossolalia as a language rather than an ecstatic utterance, Gundry concludes: “Finally, Paul’s writing in the middle of his discussion about tongues, ‘There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning; but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner ... to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.’ (xiv. 10f.), should clear away any vestige of doubt that he thinks of the gift of tongues as miraculous speaking in unlearned human languages. His foregoing comparison between tongues and the sounds of inanimate musical instruments like harps and bugles merely implies that from whatever source they come, sounds must be distinct to be meaningful. The argument of Paul does not indicate that tongues must be distinctly spoken languages just as a note from a harp or a bugle must be distinct to be effective. Paul’s application of the term ‘words’ to glossolalia further favors this understanding (xiv. 19). And evidence is piled on top of evidence when Paul applies Isaiah xxviii. 11f. to glossolalia, for that Old Testament passage refers to the foreign language spoken by the Assyrians (and perhaps other foreign languages spoken by other invaders).

“We have good reasons, then, to doubt that either Paul or Luke meant ‘ecstatic utterance’ when referring to speaking in tongues. Indeed, their apparent attempt to compare Christian glossolalia with ecstatic utterance should make us hesitate to compare Christian glossolalia with ecstatic utterance in Hellenistic religion of the day or with a possible prophetic ecstaticism in the Old Testament.”

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