

Tongues: Is It the Initial Sign of the Holy Spirit's Filling?

In the early days of the charismatic renewal, before I myself was baptized in the Holy Spirit, I set out to ask every tongues-speaker I knew whether praying in tongues added a new dimension to his life.

Of course when I asked Pentecostals, the first answer almost always was, "Speaking in tongues assures me that I have been baptized in the Holy Ghost." It was this assurance that Charles Fox Parham and his students were seeking in late 1900 when they began a long Bible study on the subject. Pentecostals believe as a matter of dogma that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is always accompanied by tongues.

"The baptism of believers in the Holy Spirit," says the constitution of the Assemblies of God, "is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit of God gives them utterance."

The Declaration of Faith of the Church of God says essentially the same thing: "We believe in speaking with other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance, and that it is the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Ghost."

Outside the Pentecostal denominations, however, I found that people were not so sure—even those who themselves had spoken in tongues at the moment of Holy Spirit baptism.

A Lutheran minister, Larry Christenson, expresses what is probably the view of most non-Pentecostal tongues-speakers. After reviewing the accounts of the baptism in the book of Acts, he wrote in an article in *Trinity* magazine, "Does this mean that everyone who receives the Holy Spirit will speak in

tongues—and that if you have not spoken in tongues you have not really received the Holy Spirit?

“I do not believe that you can make such a case from Scripture. However, I do believe that the book of Acts suggests to us a helpful pattern.”

And the opposite extreme from the Pentecostals are people who are convinced they have had the baptism in the Holy Spirit but deny that tongues are a normal part of the experience at all. One of these is Dr. E. Stanley Jones.

My wife, Elizabeth, and I talked to this veteran missionary to India about his feelings on the subject and later received a letter from him in which he told us about an experience he'd had while attending Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky.

“I was in a prayer meeting in the room of one of my fellow students,” Dr. Jones wrote, “with three or four others with no special emotion or expectancy when suddenly and sovereignly we were all filled with the Holy Spirit—literally swept off our feet. I did not sleep the rest of the night, I could only walk the floor and praise Him.

“For three days no classes were held, all were turned into prayer meetings. People coming from the countryside were converted before they would get into the auditorium. They would drop on their knees on the campus and be converted.

“There was no preaching, only praying and testifying to release and victory. Every student on the campus was converted. ...

“The evidences of the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit Himself was the evidence. No other evidence was needed or wanted. To ask for evidence would be like asking for the evidence of the sun at midday. No one spoke in tongues, for it was not taught.”

So here was the gamut of opinion on the importance of tongues

in determining the Spirit's presence: from "essential" to "helpful" to "unnecessary."

But tongues were reputed to have uses other than simply to serve as a sign of the baptism. In my study of the Scriptures and my discussions with others, I discovered four.

Praising God. When the apostle Paul was talking about tongues as a gift, he related them to the ability to praise God.

We had an interesting opportunity to consider this function of tongues in contemporary experience when we talked with a young Yale graduate. Robert V. "Bob" Morris had been a member of the Yale Christian Fellowship, and had found his religious life fairly complete with the exception of this area of praise.

He knew what it was, he said, to thank God for specific things. And he'd often experienced exaltation when he listened to beautiful organ music during a service or saw a lovely piece of stained glass.

But he admitted that he had not yet learned to praise of God in and of Himself until he received the baptism in the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues.

In Bob's personal religious life tongues filled a very special gap.

"For me," Bob told us, "the gift of tongues turned out to be the gift of praise. As I used the unknown language which God had given me I felt rising in me the love, the awe, the adoration pure and uncontingent, that I had not been able to achieve in a thought-out prayer.

"Praise and adoration are basically non-conceptual things, and glossalalia is non-conceptual prayer. It releases us from our dependence on specifics and step-by-step thought processes into a direct awareness of God."

Nor did this new dimension in prayer hold true only when Bob

was praying in tongues. He noticed at once a new ability to praise and magnify God in English. Often he would begin his devotions with tongues, feel the swelling of this new capacity in him, and then switch to English, finding his total prayer life transformed.

Strengthening oneself. Bob noted that in addition to his new ability to praise God, he had also “sensed very definitively a literal physical power and resiliency to meet the tasks of daily life.” This added strength and resiliency was another purpose of tongues noted by Paul. The man who speaks in tongues, Paul wrote, edifies himself, or builds himself up (see 1 Cor. 14:4).

We have a friend who used to commute by ferry between Staten Island and Manhattan, in New York City. The trip could have been a frustration in a busy day. But this man, David Wilkerson, used the time on the boat for prayer in tongues.

He would start off by thinking of all the things he had to be thankful for. In a reversal of Bob Morris’ sequence, he would review them one by one in his mind, in English, praising God for each one.

Bit by bit, inside him, he would feel a mounting sense of joy. He was conscious of being loved and taken care of. He began to glimpse pattern and design in all that was happening to him. And suddenly in trying to express his gratitude he would reach a language barrier.

English could no longer express what he felt. It was simply inadequate for the Being he perceived. It was at this point that he would burst through into communication which was not limited by vocabulary. His spirit as well as his mind would start to praise God.

Inevitably, by the time David reached the Manhattan pier a transformation had taken place. He was built up in body and in spirit. He felt emboldened, ready to tackle impossible tasks,

invigorated and refreshed, ready to meet whatever the day had to offer. And this was often important, for he was a youth worker among the street gangs in the New York slums—a job that brings him into contact with teenage dope addicts, child prostitutes, young killers and some of the most discouraging and intractable problems in the world today.

Praying by the Spirit. Another use of tongues suggested in the Bible is to let us pray even when we have no idea what to ask for in a given situation.

One of the most startling instances I know of when the intellect simply refused to pray in an emergency was related to me by William C. “Bill” Nelson. At the time this incident took place, the Rev. Nelson was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Whitman, Massachusetts.

In the dead of night, one evening in the fall of 1959, the telephone beside Bill’s bed rang. Fumbling for the receiver, Bill was still groggy when a woman’s voice identified itself as belonging to a nurse at a nearby hospital. There had been an automobile accident, the voice continued.

“We have Carol Vinall here. Her mother gave your name as minister. You better get here right away if you’re coming. Doctor doesn’t think she’ll live another hour.” “I’ll be there.”

Bill threw his clothes on and crowded the speed limit every mile of the way to the hospital. The desk had been alerted that he was coming and sent him up to the third floor. The clock across from the elevator said 3:15 a.m.

“This way,” a nurse said.

Thirteen-year-old Carol lay in a high-sided bed with no sign of life about her. Her mother stood beside the oxygen tent. “It was a head-on collision,” she said to Bill. “She hasn’t moved since I got here.” Apparently Carol had been thrown

through a windshield. A doctor explained that there was injury to the brain shelf.

"If she lives," Mrs. Vinall said, "they say she might not be ... normal."

Bill looked at Carol and felt that the doctors' guess of an hour was overlong. The girl still had her clothes on; her black sweater was torn and stained. Her hair, pulled back from her torn and bruised face, was matted with blood. The emergency stitches holding the cuts together were swollen and angry.

And the worst of the injuries, he knew, he could not see at all. Deep inside her skull the bone shelf that supported her brain was fractured.

What damage was there to the brain itself? Did he have any right to pray for a physical recovery when there was every chance Carol would be more like a vegetable than a human? Yet, surely, he could not pray that she die.

Bill approached the girl and placed his hands on the one portion of her body that seemed unhurt, her right arm. He took a deep breath and began to pray not with his mind but with his lips and tongue only, using the sounds God gave him. He turned the prayer over entirely to the Holy Spirit, knowing that He loved Carol more than any human could.

Bill prayed in the Spirit this way, quietly and under his breath, for 15 or 20 minutes. He was only vaguely aware of the room around him.

But he became aware of two things that were happening inside himself. He felt a current of warmth flow through him to the little girl whose arm he held lightly in prayer. And he was aware of the strange, brilliant certainty growing stronger each moment: the sure knowledge that Carol was going to be well again.

Bill was right.

Twelve weeks later, Carol was back in school. Today, years after the accident, the only after-effects are some hair-fine scars on Carol's face and arms. It is as true today, Bill Nelson believes, as it was when Paul wrote to the Romans, that when we do not know how to pray, "the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness."

Hearing from God. The fourth and final claim made in the Bible for tongues is that—together with the companion gift of interpretation—it provides a means for God to communicate directly with a group of Christians assembled together in worship. It was this use of tongues in public worship that alone struck me as suspect.

I had by this time attended a great many Pentecostal services and recorded my observations. I noted that there was often no correlation between the length of the message in tongues and the length of the interpretation. I frequently had the feeling that an interpretation was produced just because Paul insisted on it, and not in response to a genuine inner urging.

I was usually disappointed in the content of the interpretation: more often than not it was a stereotypical, generalized exhortation. I was bothered, too, that the language used was almost exclusively King James English. Why should God, if He were really using this means to communicate with people here and now, not use the language of here and now?

And then, one afternoon, I had a personal experience with this kind of message-from-God that from then on also had to be included in any thinking I did about it.

Elizabeth and I had gone to Philadelphia to a meeting of "The Saturday Group"—a fluid and deliberately nonorganized collection of tongues-speaking Christians who met one Saturday a month for a daylong, Spirit-filled prayer meeting. For the

first hour or so after we joined the group, the meeting was similar to others we had attended. There was a good deal of prayer in tongues, but it was private prayer: either individuals worshiping quietly by themselves or little groups of three and four “ministering” to one another.

All at once, though, a woman Methodist minister stepped to the center of the room and gave an utterance in tongues that was clearly intended for the entire group to hear. There was immediate silence.

Then a man’s voice interpreted. The language used was simple, modern English, quietly spoken:

“Do not worry. I am pleased with the stand you have taken. This is difficult for you but will bring much blessing to another.”

These words hit me with a power that is indescribable. I knew they were meant for me, specifically for me, right then. Indeed, they gave me the courage to stand by a difficult decision I had made the week before regarding another person—even in the face of subsequent pressure.

But what was germane to the question I had initially asked about tongues was the emotion of absolute certainty that was my interior reaction to that message and its interpretation. I no more questioned, at the time, that those were God’s words to me, than I question my name.

Later, of course, I toyed with all kinds of other meanings the words could have had. But I couldn’t argue away my feelings at the time. Here was something I had not read in Paul’s letters and could not have guessed: that God might accompany the messages with a corroborating conviction in the hearer.

Certainly, my investigations had turned up a number of uses for the gift of tongues beyond simply confirming that a person has been baptized in the Holy Spirit. In fact, the practical

value of this miraculous gift was no longer limited to those I observed or interviewed—it had become a part of my own experience.