

*Presented at the Shepherds 360 Conference
October 21-23, 2024 – Shepherd’s Theological Seminary, Cary, NC*

**Tongues of Fire and Tongues of Smoke
A Case for Two Different Types of *γλῶσσαι* in the New Testament**

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Abstract

The argument in this paper is that the New Testament references to speaking in tongues (*γλῶσσαι*), in the Book of Acts and the First Epistle to the Corinthians, are not of a singular character. To the contrary, the biblical record seems to describe two different phenomena. The distinct character of these two types of tongues has eluded contemporary readers. This is largely because modern readers are largely unfamiliar with *glossolia* as a cultural-historical religious expression of pagan cultic worship during the second-temple period. This paper will differentiate between these two types of tongues (*γλῶσσαι*), by use of the terms “tongues of fire” and “tongues of smoke,” the designations of which do not appear in Scripture but have been adopted in this paper for disambiguation. The former term, “tongues of fire,” will be used to describe the divinely acquired ability to speak in unlearned human dialects, such as is evidenced throughout the Book of Acts. The later designation, “tongues of smoke,” will be used to reference the Greco-religious practice of ecstatic utterances that were indiscernible to human observers but regarded as possessing a cultic prophetic character in pagan temple worship.

Introduction

Despite that the New Testament seems to engage the topic of tongues (*γλῶσσαι*) more than almost any of the other charismatic gifts (*χαρισμάτα*), consensus over this topic has eluded

Evangelicals for centuries. There are two major factors that contribute to this ongoing uncertainty: (1) most who engage this study do so from a framework of personal experience or denominational proclivity rather than careful exegesis that is free from ecclesiastical bias or theological precommitment; and (2) most contemporary readers are entirely unfamiliar with the socio-historical cultic practice of *glossolalia* that was common to first century readers who were the original recipients of the New Testament writings. This paper intends to largely side-step the first issue and engage the topic on the grounds of the second. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to offer a few clarifying statements concerning the motivation, methodology, and presupposition of the author.

With regard to motivation, I spent the first seven years of my Christian life in a charismatic church where the practice of tongues-speaking, or *glossolalia*, was considered a normal Christian expression. Moreover, I have family members and very dear friends who practice tongues-speaking today. On top of this, I work with a large network of churches overseas where *glossolalia* is regarded as normative. However, I never personally participated in the practice of *glossolalia*. My proximity to those with a penchant for practicing *glossolalia* drove me to study this subject.

As far as methodology is concerned, this paper is a summary of my research into this topic, wherein I conducted advanced exegetical analysis, including translation and diagramming of every New Testament reference to tongues in the original (*koine*) Greek. Moreover, this exegetical analysis is informed by my ancillary historical research into this topic, as a professionally trained PhD historian. I maintain that this combination of linguistic and historical research elucidate this issue in such a way that clear conclusions can be reached concerning the nature and practice of tongues in the New Testament and in the church today.

Finally, a major presupposition of this paper is that the meaning of any text is determined by the intent of its author(s) and is best understood in light of how it would have been received by the original intended audience. It is therefore necessary to consider the phenomena of *glossolalia* or “ecstatic utterances” in cultic religious contexts, which shaped the background for the original recipients of the New Testament writings and informed its reception among the gentile communities in the first century, where Christianity took root. Aside from the heavily disputed long ending of Mark,¹ which mentions tongues-speaking along with snake-handling and resistance to imbibing poison (Mark 16:17–18), the New Testament references to tongues are confined to two books: the Acts of the Apostles (2:1–4; 10:44–48; 19:1–7) and Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians (12:10, 28–30; 13:1; 14:1–40). These two books will be considered in turn, beginning with the Book of Acts and proceeding to the Corinthian epistle.

Tongues of Fire

The Book of Acts provides readers with the only historical narrative accounts of tongues-speaking in the New Testament. Biblical Greek scholar, Spiros Zodhiates, has noted that Luke’s witness bears particular significance inasmuch as “all other references to speaking with tongues in Scripture are discussions about it, not historical records of fact or occurrence.”² Not once, but three times, the act of speaking in tongues is expressly cited in the Acts narrative (2:1–4; 10:44–48; 19:1–7). Each of these will be considered in brief below, and commonalities and differences

¹ For a more detailed consideration of this passage and how it fits with the overall witness of tongues in the New Testament, see James Fazio, “Tongues are for a Sign.” Unpublished thesis (Southern California Seminary, 2005), available online at: <https://www.academia.edu/7934618/> or in the print collection at the SCS Library.

² Spiros Zodhiates, *Tongues!? (Tennessee: AMG Publishers, 1995), 18.*

will be observed to distinguish the character of tongues, as it appears in Luke's narrative offered in the Book of Acts.

The Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4)

The first historical account of tongues in the New Testament occurred fifty days after Christ's crucifixion, in Jerusalem, on the Jewish festival known as the Day of Pentecost. This event is recorded as follows:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1–4)

Tongues is seen here as one of three outward manifestations, along with a sound of rushing wind (Acts 2:2), and the appearance of flames of fire (Acts 2:3). Each of these manifestations served, in a unique way, to authenticate the divine source of the message which the apostles began to preach on that day concerning the Christ. Only one of the three manifestations was repeated—namely, tongues.

The chief question concerning the phenomenon that occurred on the Day of Pentecost has to do with the particular nature of the tongues-speaking as recorded by Luke. In the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* Gerald Hovenden has noted the three most prominent views:

(1) These tongues...consisted of ecstatic speech...At Pentecost the ecstatic speaking was miraculously interpreted in the ears of those present...(2) These tongues...were foreign languages...(3) This view holds that the tongues at Pentecost...were a temporary speaking in foreign languages...That the supernatural phenomena at Pentecost (including also the mighty wind and the fire-like tongues) were not repeated

is no more surprising than the non-repetition of the physical manifestations at Sinai when the Law was given.³

With regard to the first view listed above, “a number of scholars have argued that the miracle of Pentecost was not so much a miracle of being able to speak foreign languages, but rather a miracle of *hearing*.”⁴ However, this position is not to be preferred in that, while there is much evidence in support of a miracle of tongues-speaking at Pentecost, there is absolutely no supporting evidence for a miracle of hearing—let alone one that is bestowed upon unbelievers. Scripture confirms this point by means of the hearers’ response, expressed in the words “we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues” (Acts 2:11). In this verse, the languages which the believers at Pentecost were speaking are affirmed to be those native to the listeners.

The argument presented in the first point is further weakened by the words: “each of us hears them in his own native language” (Acts 2:8). The Greek grammar used in this statement gives more specific insight into the nature of the spoken word which was expressed at Pentecost. Here, rather than *γλῶσσαι* the word *διαλέκτω* is used, from which is derived the English word “dialect.” Thus, the following observation has been made, “It is apparent that the word in Acts 2:6, 8 is syn. with *glōssais* (1100, pl.), tongues or languages in Acts 2:11 (cf. Acts 2:4 where it definitely means language).”⁵ That *διαλέκτω* refers to a normal, ethnic language spoken by a people or province is quite certain. Subsequently, the grammatical association of *γλῶσσαι* with *διαλέκτω* in this context leads to the conclusion that the tongues of Pentecost were, indeed, the normal spoken dialects of the various peoples present. Concerning the Greek usage of this word,

³ Homer A. Kent Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome Studies in the Book of Acts* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 2000), 31–32.

⁴ Gerald Hovenden, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 22* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 64.

⁵ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (Tennessee: AMG Publishers, 1993), 433.

the following has been noted: “The foreigners present spoke not only different languages but different *dialects* of the same language. The Phrygians and Pamphylians, for instance both spoke Greek, but in different idioms; the Parthians, Medes, and Elamites all spoke Persian, but in different provincial forms.”⁶ This reinforces the conclusion that the tongues spoken at Pentecost were known human languages.

Whether these languages persisted beyond the occasion described at Pentecost cannot be conclusively affirmed. While the text does not expressly state that these languages were retained by those who experienced the miracle of speaking, it can be safely surmised that the sound of rushing wind and apparent flames of fire were not repeated. Whereas Luke makes it a point to record the miracle of tongues-speaking which occurred on subsequent occasions, the accompanying audible and visible signs evidently did not accompany them. This is a point to bear in mind as we proceed to a consideration of the other two events recorded in Acts.

The House of Cornelius (Acts 10:44–48)

The second historical account of tongues in the New Testament occurred eight years later, in Caesarea, at the house of Cornelius. That event is described as follows:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days. (Acts 10:44–48)

In this instance, the miracle of speaking is demonstrated to the exclusion of any other outwardly

⁶ Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament, Vol. I* (Virginia: Macdonald Publishing Company), 450.

miraculous manifestations. In this regard, this event is dissimilar to Pentecost. Nevertheless, there are noticeable similarities between these two occurrences. Looking back upon this event, the apostle Peter made the following observation concerning the tongues phenomenon that he witnessed at the house of Cornelius:

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?” (Acts 11:15–17)

Consequently, some have questioned whether the event at Cornelius’ house is indicative of “a Gentile Pentecost.”⁷ Certainly, Peter was impacted by the Caesarean experience in a way that resulted in his equating this event to that which occurred in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 10:47; 11:15,17; 15:8). While notable similarities do exist between these two incidents, the theological implications of Pentecost—with reference to the irrevocable abiding presence of the Holy Spirit among men—is sufficient reason to set Pentecost apart from other related occurrences. Nevertheless, the act of tongue-speaking in Caesarea served a very similar purpose to what had occurred in Jerusalem, eight years prior. The gospel being spoken in different languages was a sign evidencing divine authority and confirming a new set of lines along which God was beginning to work. This same statement could directly apply to the display of tongues that occurred at Pentecost. Whereas tongues at Pentecost authenticated the message of the apostles pertaining to the crucified and resurrected Christ, here in Caesarea it validated the inclusion of the Gentiles as welcome recipients of that same gospel message—an equally unprecedented and momentous occasion.

⁷ Hovenden, 94.

The nature of the tongues spoken in this passage is not as clearly discernable, as these verses lack the abundance of commentary that accompany the Pentecostal account. However, it has been suggested that: “since their own language was Roman, it is probable that they were enabled to speak in Aramaic or Hebrew, which could be understood by Peter and the other Jews.”⁸ This conclusion is derived from the supposition that Peter and those with him were apparently able to understand the speaking of Cornelius and those of his household, as indicated in the following words: “For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God” (Acts 10:48). The argument is that Peter and his company could not have known that those of Cornelius’ household were praising God if the diversity of languages were not intelligible to the hearers. Little more can be concluded from the text about this phenomena, and so we turn now to the third account.

The Disciples of John (Acts 19:1–7)

The third and final account where the tongues phenomenon is described occurred at Ephesus, this time among the disciples of John the Baptist. Luke records the incident as follows:

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John's baptism,” they replied. Paul said, “John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all. (Acts 19:1–7)

This occurrence is similar to the one in Caesarea, in some respects, while maintaining certain distinctions. Here, John’s disciples are baptized in water, after which the apostle lays

⁸ Zhodiates, *Tongues!?*, 23.

hands upon them, and they subsequently begin speaking in tongues. Furthermore, exclusive to this event, the ones speaking in tongues also are said to have “prophesied.” What is meant by the term “prophesied” is not immediately evident, though its connection with “tongues” in this passage serves to create parallels between the two terms. Speaking to the parallels between these Greek terms, Kittel has noted: “Prophecy and speaking in tongues have much in common, since both are in a special way the work of the Spirit. They are obviously related in Ac...The parallelism is clear in Ac. 19:6.”⁹ More specifically, the following observation has been made:

The word “prophesied” should be taken as more fully explanatory of what was involved in “speaking with tongues.” Do not confuse the different senses of the word “prophesied” here. In modern usage it almost always means foretold future events”; while in Scriptural usage, though it can have that significance, it more generally means preached... When prophesying is spoken of in connection with tongues, it has an even narrower sense, that of an immediate declaration of some particular message that God has for the people on a certain occasion.¹⁰

Again, this may be reading into the passage more than is stated, as there are no details given concerning the specific message communicated in the prophesies of John’s disciples. Rather, in this passage, tongues and prophecy are not revealed to have any particular significance beyond that of signs confirming the divine nature of the unseen working of the Holy Spirit among the Ephesian believers. Though it is not expressly stated, the signs which Paul and his company witnessed may have had a profound impact on the hearers. It could otherwise be surmised that Paul and his company were edified, as the following verses reveal that Paul was emboldened to proclaim the gospel in the Ephesian synagogue over the following three months. Luke records that for that duration of time Paul remained in Ephesus, “arguing persuasively

⁹ Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), Vol. VI, 851–852.

¹⁰ Zodhiates, *Tongues!?*, 26.

about the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). From there, the apostle proceeded onward, “so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).

No further details are provided concerning the tongues spoken by the disciples of John. Whether Paul and his companions understood the languages which John’s disciples spoke, is not said. However, that the prophetic nature of their utterances was discerned is good cause to intimate that the languages in which they were speaking was discernable.

Summary

What can be determined from a comparison of the three texts in Acts is that each of the occurrences of tongues took place at the time of the initial reception of the Holy Spirit, by a particular people group, as confirmation of God’s working among them. Concerning this, it has been suggested that “Luke appeals to tongues at significant stages in the advancement of the early church—to mark the successive overcoming of religious and social barriers.”¹¹ From Pentecost, to Caesarea, and to Ephesus, each distinct population received the Holy Spirit for the first time; and as a confirmatory sign, each group exhibited the miracle of speaking in tongues.

Another similarity between each of the occurrences in Acts is that apostolic presence was essential to each of the tongues experiences. Peter was present in Jerusalem as well as in Caesarea—and in fact, his presence was apparently necessary for both occasions (1:4; 10:5)—and Paul was present at Ephesus (19:1). Moreover, there is no evidence given in Acts that would indicate that tongues were manifested more than once for each individual social group. It is not stated that who spoke in tongues in Jerusalem ever did so again, after the initial outpouring at

¹¹ Hovenden, 100.

Pentecost. Similarly, there is no evidence that tongues later exhibited by members of the house of Cornelius. Just as also, there is no indication from the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesian Church that the phenomena of tongues-speaking persisted in Ephesus. While this is not conclusive evidence, it is noteworthy and deserving of consideration.

Thus, what can be surmised from the Lucan portrayal of tongues is that it consisted of the temporary endowment to speak in known languages and/or dialects of other people groups, that were otherwise unlearned by the speaker. This phenomena, which always occurred in the presence of an apostle, served as confirmation that God was beginning a new work or was expanding an existing work among a new and distinct people group. However, it remains a particular point of interest that manifestations of tongues in the Book of Acts had no apparent need for interpretation.

Tongues in First Corinthians 12–13

As mentioned above, the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians is the only epistolary account of tongues in Scripture. It is noteworthy that while the New Testament includes four separate lists of spiritual gifts, the only mention of tongues is in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Moreover, the question of unintelligible, ecstatic utterances arises from the unique character of tongues as it is presented in this epistle—particularly in chapter fourteen. This is because of the historic connection this region had to the Greco-pagan worship where *glossolalia* played a prominent role in the temple rites. Corinth was home to various religious cults and temples, including the Temple of Aphrodite, which housed a thousand sacred prostitutes that served also as prophetesses. At the time Paul penned his corrective letter to the church, the carryover of the Corinthian culture into Christian worship is evident. These influences are at least partly what

prompted the apostle's stern rebuke. However, as it will be seen, the references to "tongues" in this epistle reveal that the term does not evidence a consistent and/or singular character. In chapter twelve the apostle speaks of spiritual gifts in the church and gives attention to both speaking and interpreting of tongues. Then, after a lengthy rebuke in chapter thirteen, he proceeds to denigrate the value of tongues in the assembly, concluding "prophecy rather than tongues-speaking, edifies the church."

This raises the important point of the flexibility of the Greek language at the time when the New Testament was written. As with any language, so also with *koine* Greek, it would be wrong to assume that a given word has the same meaning in each occurrence, regardless of its context. A word or phrase may be used to convey one sense when used in a particular way, and yet may take on an altogether different meaning when used in another context—and this speaks nothing of variant uses by differing authors. The New Testament grammarian A. T. Robertson has noted that "for most of the history of the Greek language no lexicons or grammars were in use."¹² Consequently, the fact can be observed that "the language of Christianity was not stereotyped at first and there was more play for individualism."¹³ The writers of the New Testament could differ greatly in their use of a term, and again the same writer could use a term with a wide variety of different meanings. That there was no single, fixed, universal meaning to many of the terms which Christians frequently use today is a fact with which the interpreter of Scripture must not ignore. This was particularly true of "tongues."¹⁴ Kittel has noted that in the New Testament, the word "tongue" (γλῶσσα) is seen to have three very distinct meanings:

¹² Archibald T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1934), 208, 177.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁴ Kittel, *Vol. I*, 725.

- (1) organ of speech, *tongue*
- (2) a body of words and systems that makes up a distinctive language, *language, tongue*
- (3) an utterance outside the normal patterns of intelligible speech and therefore requiring special interpretation, *ecstatic language, ecstatic speech, tongue* ¹⁵

Thus far, all that has been observed concerning the use of the word “tongue” throughout the Book of Acts reflects a demonstration of speech that bears the characteristics of the second of the above three definitions. What we have labeled “tongues of fire,” for purposes of disambiguation, can be categorized the supernatural ability to utter phrases that make up a known human language or dialect. It will be seen that the same cannot be said of all the references to tongues in the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians—if in fact, it can be said of any. When the various references to tongues in this epistle are compared it becomes readily apparent that they do not share many of the same distinctive traits that characterize what we have termed “tongues of fire.”

When faced with this, the interpreter of Scripture has two options: either ignore the apparent distinctions throughout the diverse accounts and seek to reconcile them or accept the peculiarities of the diverse accounts and consider each one in light of its respective context. Though it may seem most preferred to attempt to harmonize the Scriptures, especially where the same word is used, one cannot simply turn a blind eye to the glaring dissimilarities that are evidenced in the Scriptures. The text must be allowed to speak and the similarities and distinctions should be recognized, despite whatever tensions may result. Should the context seem to demand it, the dynamic flexibility of the Greek language at the time the New Testament was written can account for “tongues” to refer to “an utterance outside the normal patterns of

¹⁵ Fredrick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BDAG)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 201–202.

intelligible speech and therefore requiring special interpretation, *ecstatic language, ecstatic speech, tongue,*” or as it has come to be known: *glossolalia*.

The Gift of Tongues (1 Cor 12:7–10, 28–30)

In the twelfth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians Paul references tongues. The apostle begins this section with the introduction, “Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant;” (1 Cor. 12:1) after which he then proceeds to educate the Corinthians concerning the exercise of the spiritual gifts and abilities in the Christian assembly:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. (1 Cor. 12:7–10)

There can be no question that Paul is referring to diverse endowments that various believers possess. Among these different abilities, Paul mentions “speaking in different kinds of tongues” as well as “the interpretation of tongues.” Again, he makes mention of these two gifts later in this same chapter:

And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Cor. 12:28–30)

Similarities between these two passages are quite apparent. Both identify “speaking in different kinds of tongues” as an ability that a believer can possess. Moreover, they both list the gift of “speaking in different kinds of tongues” along with interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 12:10, 30). Finally, in both references, tongues—as well as interpretation—is given the hindmost place. This is not to suggest that it was least in terms of importance. It is more likely, based on the context,

that it is the gift which he ended on for purpose of emphasis. In other words, it is the very purpose for which he is raising this point concerning believers' conduct within the assembly. Therefore, it can be safely determined that whatever may be said concerning the specific nature of the "tongues" referred to here in the twelfth chapter of Paul's Epistle, is true of both passages.

While there are no additional details given to reveal the specific character of the "different kinds of tongues" referred to here, the mere fact of their correlation to "interpretation" speaks volumes. In both passages, the gift of "speaking in different kinds of tongues" appears along with "interpretation"—which is never mentioned elsewhere in Scripture and was entirely absent in all of the occurrences in Acts. Additionally, there are insights to be gained from a survey of the original Greek grammar used to describe these two gifts.

The phrase "speaking in different kinds of tongues," (1 Cor. 12:10, 29) is derived from "γένη γλωσσῶν," which literally interpreted means, "kinds or species of languages."¹⁶ There should be little doubt that this phrase, in fact, refers to families of languages—i.e. known human dialects. In the coupling of the word "γλωσσῶν" with "γένη" a strong case is built for the idea that natural human dialects are meant here; "since incomprehensible ecstatic utterances could hardly be classified, it must refer to known human languages."¹⁷ The context offers no indication that anything otherwise should be inferred from these words. Furthermore, it is here in the twelfth chapter of this epistle that we are introduced to the phrase "ἐρμηνεία γλωσσῶν," literally rendered "translation of languages."¹⁸ This suggests that the endowment to speak in different languages, like the ability to translate different languages, likely refers to the abiding ability to communicate through the use of diverse languages. In this regard, it is an ability which many

¹⁶ Kittel, *Vol. I*, 684–685.

¹⁷ Zodhiates, *Tongues!?*, 44.

¹⁸ Danker, (*BDAG*), 393.

multi-lingual speakers may be seen to possess in the church today. One should not suppose that this phrase would likely refer to ecstatic utterances, which by their very nature are indiscernible and unintelligible, as no comprehensible translation could be supplied for such murmurings. In fact, a case for such unnatural utterances as these does not at all arise from the context of either of these passages, but rather is contrived from alternative verses—namely Paul’s Epistle to the Romans.¹⁹

Tongues of Angels (1 Cor 13:1)

The fact that Paul rhetorically mentions “tongues of angels” in the opening of the thirteenth chapter of this epistle has given rise to all manner of confusion concerning the nature of “tongues.” His rhetorical expression follows: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). Taken in isolation, one could see how this verse suggests the apostle possessed the inhuman capacity to speak in a heavenly tongue. The question that should naturally arises from this is: “What is the language of angels?” To conclude from this phrase that the angelic hosts have a language peculiar to themselves would be to devise a doctrine with little more than vague and uncertain Scriptural support. Furthermore, doing so may well create greater conflict with the overall witness of Scripture than it brings harmony to the whole.

Throughout the Bible, everywhere angels are perceived as bearing any manner of

¹⁹ Romans 8:26–27 is beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the meaning of this passage concerns the inaudibility of the Spirit’s groanings, as revealed in the word “ἀλαλήτοις,” (*alaletois*—a word not repeated elsewhere in the Greek New Testament. Note that this word does not simply convey the idea that the words cannot be discerned, but rather that they are “unutterable.” A closely related adjective “ἄλαλον” (*alalon*) appears twice in the Gospel of Mark (9:17, 25), where it is translated “dumb” (mute, unable to speak). The use of this word with respect to the intercession of the Spirit in Romans 8:26–27 does not leave room for debate as to whether *glossolalia* is considered. Rather, it expressly prohibits any audible expression. Simply stated, discernability of a verbal/audible expression is not in view.

communication they are seen speaking in “tongues of men” (Gen. 21:17; 1 Ki. 13:18; Dan. 8:15–27; 9:21–27; 10:9–12:13; Zech. 1:19; 4:5; 5:5,10; 6:5; Matt. 28:5; Lk. 1:13–20, 28–38; 2:9–15; Acts 11:13–14; 12:8; Rev. 4–19). Even in instances where the heavenly hosts communicate with one another—or with God, directly—their language is still discernable, being expressed in Scripture by means of what could be termed “tongues of men” (Job 1:7–12; 2:1–7; Rev. 4:10–11; 5:8–14; 19:4–7,17–18). It is, therefore, highly unlikely that the term “tongues of angels” refers to an angelic dialect which men could employ to speak either to other men, or to God, Himself. There is not sufficient biblical evidence to support the notion that angels do, in fact, have a heavenly dialect peculiar to themselves. Scripture simply does not support this.

The question remains, however, as to what the apostle intended when he said, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels” (1 Cor. 13:1)? To answer this the context in which this phrase appears must not be overlooked, as it may be seen to offer a good deal of insight in assisting to reveal the apostle’s mind more plainly.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor. 13:1–3)

The rhetorical force of his statement in these verses should make it quite evident to the reader that Paul is employing a figurative manner of discourse known as *hyperbole* or *exaggeration*. “The figure is so called because the expression adds to the sense so much that it exaggerates it...more is said than is meant to be literally understood, in order to heighten the sense.”²⁰ Concerning this phraseology, one Greek grammarian has concluded:

²⁰ E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1999), 423.

The fourfold condition is used in a broad way. Paul binds his argument from the actual (he does have prophetic powers) to the hypothetical (he does not understand all mysteries or have all knowledge [otherwise, he would be omniscient!]). This is his pattern in the first three verses of 1 Cor 13: to argue from the actual to the hypothetical. It is therefore probable that Paul could speak in the tongues of human beings, but *not* in the tongues of *angels* (v 1).²¹

The thrust of Paul's message is made clear by means of the figurative language through which he chose to express himself to the Corinthian church: "love is superior to any gift that one might possess." The apostle's intention was not, in fact, to comment on his own ability to employ demonstrably supernatural gifts, but rather to emphasize the superiority of love to even the most sensational gifts—even if beyond human measure. The desired outcome was that the Corinthian believers would put their endowments into proper perspective with respect to the Christian faith and esteem love over all else. Thus, in reference to the "tongues...of angels," one may be justified in arriving at the most evident conclusion: "1 Cor 13:1, then, offers no comfort for those who view tongues as a heavenly language."²²

Tongues Will Cease (1 Cor 13)

Without question, the single most frequently referenced passage by those who would seek to affirm that the divine ability to speak in supernaturally received languages ceased at the close of the apostolic period of the church (circa the 1st century A.D.), is expressed in the following statement by Paul:

"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears." (1 Cor. 13:8-10).

²¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 471, 698.

²² Wallace, 698.

There is no question that many have found in these words their strongest argument for the cessationist view—that the miraculous sign gifts ceased in the first century. The language here suggests that when “perfection” comes the tongues and prophecy “shall make themselves cease or automatically cease of themselves”²³—as implied by the middle voice in the Greek. Furthermore, the original language makes clear the finality of the need of tongues by use of the verb *παύω* (*pauō*—meaning “in an absolute sense, to cease, come to an end.”²⁴ Concerning the use of this word, one scholar has noted, “The Greek verb used in 1 Corinthians 13:8 (*pauō*) means ‘to cease permanently.’ It implied that when tongues ceased, they would never start up again.”²⁵ While an examination of the original Greek serves well to reveal certain elements not otherwise made clear in most English translations concerning the nature of the cessation of tongues and prophecy, the fact remains that one cannot determine from Scripture that tongues has ceased without first uncovering with unquestioning certainty the identity of the “perfection,” to which the cessation of these activities is linked. The expression which the apostle employed to express this idea, *τὸ τέλειον* (*to teleion*—meaning either “perfect” or “complete”), was not at all an unusual choice, as he had used forms of this word with some frequency in a number of his epistles (Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Eph. 4:13; Phi. 3:15; Col 1:28; and 4:12).

Some have assumed to understand the phrase, “perfection,” as referring to the completion of the New Testament Scriptures at the close of the apostolic age, as expressed in the following words:

A primary fulfilment of Paul's statement took place when the Church attained its maturity; then “tongues” entirely “ceased,” and “prophesyings” and “knowledge,” so far as they were supernatural gifts of the Spirit, were superseded as no longer required

²³ Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1 Cor. 13:8.

²⁴ Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, 1132.

²⁵ John F. MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 281.

when the ordinary preaching of the word, and the Scriptures of the New Testament collected together, had become established institutions.²⁶

As attractive as this opinion may be for those wanting to affirm the cessationist argument, fault may be found with the suggestion that τὸ τέλειον refers merely to the “completion” of the Scriptures. It would seem apparent from the context that the apostle is maintaining a much broader view—one that would, likely, be inclusive of the Christian faith, and perhaps the overall “perfection” of the Church. Along these lines, some²⁷ have suggested that τὸ τέλειον refers more likely to the eternal heavenly state which, undeniably, can be well described as “perfect.” Still, others lean toward the notion that the “perfect state” most likely refers to the coming of our Lord.²⁸

It must be acknowledged that Scripture does not expressly state to what the word “perfection” refers, in this passage. Despite that Scripture provides no clear-cut answer on this subject, history must be perceived through the kaleidoscope of extra-biblical literature in order for one to be affirmed of either the endurance or cessation of tongues, down through the ages. However, the student of Scripture does well to be reticent when it comes to drawing hard-and-fast lines in the sand where the Bible does not make the matter plain. The reference to “tongues” here does not violate the character that is demonstrated in chapter twelve of Paul’s Epistle—namely, that a time will come when the variety of spoken languages which require interpretation, as well as the verbally expressed prophetic message which they convey, will no longer be necessary. To conclude that time has already come to pass would be to move beyond the clear intent of this passage.

²⁶ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments, Vol. III* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), pt. II, 322.

²⁷ Barnes, 1 Cor. 13:8-10

²⁸ Nicholl, 900.

Tongues of Smoke (1 Cor 14)

The fourteenth chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians casts tongues in a different light than has hitherto been revealed. Here, for the first time, the apostle directly addresses the Corinthian's use—and/or abuse—of tongues-speaking within the assembly. He begins his assessment of their practice as follows: "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). This comment seems to completely contradict all that has been said up to this point concerning the nature of tongues. Clearly, the tongues at Pentecost, in Caesarea, and in Ephesus, communicated a message to men. Furthermore, in the previous chapter, Paul just associated tongues with prophesy and knowledge (1 Cor. 13:8), each of which most certainly has to do with conveying the wisdom of God unto men. Yet, here, the apostle, in no uncertain terms addresses the Corinthians' practice of as one which "does not speak to men but to God."

At this juncture, it bears repeating that there was a flexibility in the Greek language at the time in which the apostle penned these words, and that the word "tongues" evidences three different uses in the New Testament: 1) pertaining to the physical organ; 2) a linguistic tradition such as is common to human languages; and 3) audible unintelligible speech patterns. Given the apparent contradiction between the previous references to tongues and what is expressed in this statement, it would seem that the apostle had altogether different use of "tongue" in mind—and yet one that would be readily understood by his audience. One observer of this discrepancy has offered the following solution: "It is clear that Paul is speaking of two distinct manifestations of glossolalia in his letter to the Corinthians."²⁹ While the particular nature of those two distinct

²⁹ Horton, 264.

forms of tongues may be debated, the reality of the discrepancy is made quite evident throughout the New Testament.

Some have argued³⁰ that Paul is speaking here of a “devotional tongue” as opposed to the *glossolalia* of known human dialects. However, when the whole of the New Testament is framed in its proper context, the burden of proof weighs in favor of a far more likely solution—one wherein the reader perceives “Paul’s use of the word ‘tongue’ (*glōssa*) against the background of the first-century pagan religions and thus define it as ecstatic speech.”³¹ It is not at all unlikely that the tongues of Corinth would have reflected the character and influence of the cultural milieu that bore down upon the struggling Corinthian converts, a practice known to Greco-religious worship as *glossolalia*. In the words of one scholar, “[the Corinthians were] recent converts from the lowest and grossest paganism with its vices and sin...It was not easy for these converts to break with their degraded past.”³²

The fact that the Corinthians’ pagan roots heavily influenced their forms of worship is made evident in the words of the apostle, throughout this Epistle. In fact, many of the elements which serve to characterize the Corinthian Church issued from the influence of their cultural-religious background, including: their attitudes toward pagan sexual relations (1 Cor. 6:15-20), their participation in idolatry and partaking of meat sacrificed unto idols (1 Cor. 8-10), the drunkenness, gluttony, and revelry that distinguished their supposed observance of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34), the many disorders present in their public worship (1 Cor. 11, 14), as well as their attitudes concerning death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15). It would be naïveté to assume that their practice of spiritual gifts—particularly those with close parallels in their

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Walvoord and Zuck, 537.

³² Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), 626.

religious upbringing—would not also have been deeply influenced in much the same way as was nearly every other form of their worship.

With this in view, it becomes easy to perceive why the apostle would make the following assessment of the Corinthian condition:

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. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. (1 Cor. 14:2-4)

Through these words, Paul makes a clear distinction between “he who speaks in a tongue” and “he who prophesies;” whereas, in Acts we read “the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied” (Acts 19:6). To the Corinthian the one “who speaks in a tongue,” could be distinguished from “he who prophesies,” whereas in Acts, the two were interrelated.

Subsequently, Paul proceeded to argue for the superlative character of prophecy over and against tongues: “He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified” (1 Cor. 12:5). The explanation for these things is then given in the apostle’s follow-up remarks: “Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction” (1 Cor. 12:6)? By implication, these very words suggest that the tongues which the Corinthians were practicing did not consist of “revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction.” Thus, one might conclude that their speech was little more than audible unintelligible speech patterns, such as was common to *glossolalia*.

Paul, himself, likened their speaking to a “trumpet [that] does not sound a clear call” (1 Cor. 12:8), and even went so far as to tell them that they were “speaking into the air” (1 Cor. 12:9). Therefore, his directive to the Corinthian Church followed: “Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church” (1 Cor. 14:12). Bear in mind, this

rebuke comes after Paul had already declared to them:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit...speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. (1 Cor. 12:7, 10-11)

In this manner, Paul paints a vivid picture for the Corinthians wherein one would exercise a linguistic tradition such as is common to human languages, while another would interpret that language for the edification of the assembly. Yet here, Paul urges the Corinthian tongue-speaker: “let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret” (1 Cor. 14:13). That would seem an unusual request, given that he in the twelfth chapter he built a compelling case for why “the foot should not desire to be the hand” and “the ear should not desire to be the eye” (1 Cor. 12:15-16). Indeed, Paul affirmed “God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased” (1 Cor. 12:18), therefore, on what basis should one with the gift of “tongues-speaking” pray that he might instead have the gift of “interpretation of tongues”? This accentuates the tension here, that the Corinthian tongue was likely not perceived by the apostle as a divinely bestowed gift. Paul seemed unconvinced that the various demonstrations of tongues in the Corinthian assembly was in any way profitable for their edification.

Superlative Tongues of Paul

To further demonstrate the apostle’s skepticism about the character of the Corinthian tongue, he goes on to say: “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful” (1 Cor. 14:14). He therefore offers a solution to the Corinthian tongue-speaker: “So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind” (1 Cor. 14:15). In effect, Paul was directing those who were likely exhibiting *glossolalia* to pray, rather, in an intelligible and effectual manner. This

sentiment, expressed by the apostle, stands in stark opposition to the notion that the Corinthian tongues could be considered a heavenly prayer language. Here, in the most unmistakable terms this notion is repudiated.

The apostle unambiguously follows up with the most disparaging conclusion:

I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue. (1 Cor. 14:18-19)

Paul's admission to speaking in tongues more than all the Corinthians serves to further reveal the unique nature of their speech acts. Nowhere is it written that Paul—or any of the apostles—ever spoke without understanding, yet it is made clear by these words that this peculiarity characterized the Corinthian tongue. Paul, therefore, makes the declaration that, as an earthly representative of God, the Christian's goal in speaking ought to consist of bringing understanding to his audience, else it is entirely without profit (1 Cor. 14:6). The apostle's assessment follows: "Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers" (1 Cor. 14:22). In these words, Paul clarifies for the Corinthians the very purpose for tongues, as well as for prophecy. The apostle's admission finds absolute harmony with that which is portrayed in the historical occurrences of tongues as seen in the Book of Acts, wherein:

a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?" (Acts 2:6-8)

Whereas the Corinthians had apparently been making a show of audible unintelligible speech patterns in the assembly—perhaps thinking that they were, thereby, demonstrating a level of spiritual maturity—Paul reminds them that tongues were never intended for Christians within the Church. To the contrary, he affirms that God gave tongues as "a sign;" nothing more. He,

further, underscores this by insisting that tongues are “not for believers but for unbelievers.” To emphasize this point, the apostle presents the following hypothetical illustration:

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all. (1 Cor. 14:23-24)

Paul emphatically stated that if the assembly in Corinth continued their practice of *glossolalia* in the presence of skeptics the result would not be the conversion of sinners, but the damaging of their testimony. It is worthwhile to note that in none of the Scriptural references to “tongues of fire” was it implied that the purpose of divinely-imparted languages was for continued edification, exhortation, or comfort. To the contrary, Paul argues here that prophesy, rather than tongues, is for the edification of the church (1 Cor. 14:24).

Therefore, Paul offers the following limitations as a safeguard against the Corinthians’ abuse of speech patterns:

If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. (1 Cor. 14:27-28)

In these closing remarks, Paul’s verdict is that the Corinthians’ use of languages should be restricted to “two, or at the most three”—and that, only if there the language is intelligible and discernable, being rightly interpreted by another listener. By adding this final clause, the wisdom and gentle diplomacy of the apostle shines through, in that it inhibits the uttering of vain babblings—for which no interpretation can be provided—while not completely closing off the prospect of the expression of diverse languages, in the presence of an interpreter. In the absence of an interpreter to make plain the utterances of an uncertain dialect, the decree of the apostle rings clear: “let him keep silent in the church.” Furthermore, in the event that these words of his might fall on dull or deaf ears, Paul expressly states, “what I am writing to you is the Lord’s

command” (1 Cor. 14:37), thereby leaving his audience without excuse.

In his closing remarks, Paul makes a conscious effort to remind the Corinthian reader of the precious liberty that is to characterize the Lord’s assembly. Thus, he imparts the following directive: “Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues” (1 Cor. 14:39). In these words, the apostle makes it clear to the Corinthian Church, in light of all that has been said, that they are not to, altogether, forbid multi-lingual exhortations in the assembly where translation may be provided. Concerning this final injunction, one scholar has remarked:

Observe that the command to prophesy is connected with the command “Forbid not to speak with tongues” not by an adversative (“but”), but by the connective *kai* “and.” “Tongues” here does not stand in contrast to prophesying but is regarded as a means of accomplishing it. To prophesy, you must make the counsel of God clear to your listeners. Unknown tongues cannot accomplish this. We have seen right along that Paul has used the singular form, “a tongue,” with a singular subject, to refer to unknown ecstatic utterances, and the plural form, “tongues,” with a singular subject, to refer to the known, understandable languages. Tongues (understandable foreign languages) are consistent with the use of prophecy and are to be permitted. Such would not be the case if Paul were tolerating tongue-speaking as opposed to prophecy.³³

If Paul was correct in assuming that his directions to the Corinthian assembly would be received in all earnestness, then it follows for him to have qualified all that he said concerning the bridling of the Corinthian-tongue with these closing words. It would have been to the detriment of the church had the Corinthians, in response to the apostle’s criticism, over-reacted and forbid multi-lingual worship, where translation could be supplied. This would risk fracturing the church according to language/dialect, and thus risk fragmenting the church according to affinity groups. By these closing words, the apostle clarifies that diversity of languages are permissible in the assembly, providing interpretation can be supplied.

³³ Zodhiates, *Tongues!?*, 170-171.

Summary

A certain distinction can be seen between the various portrayals of glossolalia in the New Testament with which the student of Scripture must reckon. The Lucan portrayal of tongues, throughout the Book of Acts, bears distinct characteristics—i.e. being clearly understood by the listeners, and having a certain association with prophecy (Acts 2:6; 10:46; 19:6)—that are otherwise not descriptive of the Corinthian-tongue usage which Paul chastised. It seems then that the character of tongues spoken in Corinth was indiscernible, unintelligible, and altogether profitless to the listener (1 Cor. 14:2-11) and was consistent with the character of *glossolalia*, or ecstatic speech in Greco-religious worship. To safeguard against this unprofitable practice, the apostle concluded that, within the assembly, they ought simply to abstain from any form of speech for which known human language cannot supply a meaning (1 Cor 14:28).

Conclusion

This paper has contended that the various New Testament references to speaking in tongues (*γλῶσσαι*) are not of a singular character. If resolution to the longstanding confusion within the church today over this topic is achievable, recognition of these distinctions is necessary. Moreover, this issue is further obfuscated by the fact that most contemporary readers are unfamiliar with *glossolalia* as a cultural-historical Greco-religious phenomenon that was common to the world of the New Testament—and Corinth in particular. The academy can serve the church well by supplying this information as well as by offering careful exegetical analysis of the relevant texts that serve to demonstrate that “tongues” (*γλῶσσαι*) is used in the New Testament in more than one way. The references to “tongues” throughout the Book of Acts

reveal a supernaturally bestowed ability to at least temporarily speak in a known human dialect that signified the apostolic messenger and served as a transitional marker concerning the Spirit's work among different people groups. The references to "tongues" in 1 Corinthians 12-13 speaks to the ability of Christian believers to serve another through in the assembly by exercising their faculties of speaking and interpreting different human dialects for the edification of the church. Conversely, the references to "tongues" in the fourteenth chapter of that same epistle reveals that the Corinthian practice of tongues was not for the edification of the church and was an altogether unprofitable and unsuitable practice, when no translation is available. A proper understanding of this can yield a tremendous benefit for the Christian church, today. It is no less true today than it was in the days of the New Testament, the speaking in different languages in the church is of value where translation can be provided. However, where no translation is available, the apostolic prohibition against tongues should be maintained: "if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church... for God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." (1 Cor 14:28, 33)

For a more detailed consideration of this passage and how it fits with the overall witness of tongues in the New Testament, see James Fazio, "Tongues are for a Sign." Unpublished thesis (Southern California Seminary, 2005), available online at: <https://www.academia.edu/7934618/> or in the print collection at the SCS Library.

