

---

# Tongues and the Mystery Religions of Corinth

---

H. Wayne House

---

Of all the controversial subjects discussed in Christian circles, probably few have received more attention than the subject of glossolalia. Though the material written on this subject is enormous, much confusion pervades the issue. Since the Corinthian assembly gave undue preeminence to "speaking in tongues," it is only to be expected that a person seeking to understand the Corinthian phenomenon should desire to know the reason for this stress. This article seeks to demonstrate that some of the Corinthian Christians brought aspects of their pagan background into their worship and theology. These false perspectives and practices were characteristic of the contemporary religious setting in Corinth from which they had been converted. This article also seeks to show that the Apostle Paul, in order to rid the church at Corinth of these ideas, used various means of argumentation to combat these practices, even using some of their terminology for the purpose of argument.

## **Statement of the Problem**

It is not a new thought that pagan forces were hard at work in the church at Corinth, but their identity and to what degree they influenced that congregation, is a matter of debate. Scholars of the History of Religions school earlier in this century believed that Christians, including those at Corinth, were affected by the Hellenistic mystery religions.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand

Schmithals and others have posited Gnostic influence in the church at Corinth.<sup>2</sup>

Religious ecstasy, particularly glossolalia, is found in the mystery religions or the religion of Apollo, rather than in Gnosticism as Bultmann and others have argued. Some of the characteristics of Gnosticism were already present in the general religious attitudes in the first century A.D.; but since Gnosticism was a later Christian heresy,<sup>3</sup> it would be anachronistic to see Gnosticism in Corinth. Whatever the cause, the church in this hub of pagan perversity was in grave trouble; the church abounded in nonbiblical and immoral practices.

### Proper Methodology in Approaching the Problem

Scholars have differed in their view of the extent of the mystery religions' influence on Christianity. Clemen argued that Christianity acquired forms, conceptions, and rites from the mystery sects.<sup>4</sup> Likewise Heussi said that undoubtedly the language and piety of the mysteries influenced the church.<sup>5</sup>

Pahl has a more cautious view. "The Mysteries may have exerted limited formal influence on certain subsequent developments of Christianity but they had no influence whatever on the origin of Christianity."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Geden says that most likely the Mithras doctrines and ritual had an unconscious effect on the language and teaching of some of the Christian apologists.<sup>7</sup>

Schweitzer argued that Pauline Christianity was not influenced by the mysteries.<sup>8</sup> Pruemm also appears to support the view that the mystery religions had no influence on Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

Another view, posited by Metzger, is that the mystery religions may have borrowed from Christianity.<sup>10</sup> This writer concurs with Metzger and contends that early Christianity did not borrow its theology from the mystery religions, though certainly early Christians individually may have been affected (which may have been true at Corinth).

The basic problem in discussing the mystery religions is that so many centuries have separated the enquirer from the subject of inquiry. Grant spoke of this problem when he wrote about the study of Greek religion in the Hellenistic-Roman world.

And yet we are still on the outside, and have only the records, descriptive or interpretative, literary or archeological, which a few men here and there in that ancient world left behind them. How shall we ever get really inside that ancient faith, or complex of faiths,

and see the world as men saw it then? There is no other way, I believe, than by a conscious effort of the imagination, by reading and thinking and in a sense dreaming our way back into it. And there is one caution we simply must never ignore — like the warnings to persons with magic gifts in many an old tale — we must not let our imaginings and our dreams conflict with the reality recorded in the books, the inscriptions, and the surviving rites; our indispensable guide must be a thorough knowledge of the facts so far as they have come down to us, all the facts, not just a pleasing little selection made to fit some theory or other!<sup>11</sup>

## A Look at the Origin and Philosophies of the Mysteries

### ROMANHELLENISM AND RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

When the church began, the state religions in the Roman Empire, though given proper outward honor, had somehow lost their grip on individuals. One reason for this may be that since the philosophers had found the gods wanting, the fear of the gods had been removed. Furthermore, in view of Roman domination over different countries and cities, the impotency of the gods became pronounced, and this realization was sensed by individuals. If the god could not help the city, how could he meet an individual's needs?

The constant flux seen in the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods offered individuals little hope. People turned from thought to experience as the basis of religion, from rational content to emotional yearning.<sup>12</sup> Their contact with the Near East, especially from the time of Alexander, brought in new ideas which found favor with the peoples of the western Mediterranean world. The mystery religions swiftly spread in a world in which travel was relatively easy and in which soldiers, who believed in these mystery religions, moved from place to place. The people were seeking a change of some sort, which the dynamic of the religious syncretism provided. The key attraction of the mystery cults is captured by Gardner.

Why were the priests able to attract the men and women who were dissatisfied with their lives and anxious for a better hope? What could they offer to the votaries? The best answer may be given in a single word. The great need and longing of the time was for salvation, *soteria*. Men and women were eager for such a communion with the divine, such a realization of the interest of God in their affairs, as might serve to support them in the trials of life, and guarantee to them a friendly reception in the world beyond the grave. . . . The communion with some saving deity, then, was the [goal] of all practice of the mysteries.<sup>13</sup>

One must not suppose that the mystery religions were all alike. The Greek world abounded with all sorts of private associations with their respective gods. Even these varied in their myths, dramas, and practices. For example, the Eleusian variety is first heard of at Eleusis, close to Corinth and Athens. This mystery had agricultural worship at its center. The Dionysian mystery was very excessive in its religious practices, including uncontrollable ecstasy, eating of raw flesh, and orgies. A third important cult was that of Orpheus. It had an early influence on the people of Greece, being possibly a revised version of the cult of Dionysus. Its power was waning even by the time of Plato, who may have encountered it.

Three sources are the most probable candidates for the ecstatic phenomenon seen at Corinth: the Cybele-Attis cult, the Dionysian cult (both mystery religions), and the religion of Apollo.

The worship of Cybele-Attis was accepted by the Greeks in approximately 200 B.C. The rites of this cult were extreme in nature. Priests who were stirred by clashing cymbals, loud drums, and screeching flutes, would at times dance in a frenzy of excitement, gashing their bodies. Even new devotees would emasculate themselves in worship of the goddess.

The Cybele-Attis mystery religion existed in the first century A.D. Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41–54) introduced a festival of Cybele-Attis which focused on the death and resurrection of Attis.<sup>14</sup> Montanus, a second-century Christian heretic, known for his ecstatic excesses, was a priest of Cybele at one time.<sup>15</sup> However, no evidence that this writer examined indicated that a temple of Cybele-Attis was in Corinth during the first century, though the Corinthians may have been familiar with that cult.

Dionysus, the god of wine, became one of the most popular gods of the Greek pantheon. The pine tree became identified with him, and the Delphic oracle commanded the Corinthians to worship a particular pine tree out of which two images of the god were made.<sup>16</sup> Hoyle describes the nature of this worship.

Following the torches as they dipped and swayed in the darkness, they climbed mountain paths with head thrown back and eyes glazed, dancing to the beat of the drum which stirred their blood. . . . In the state of *ekstasis* or *enthousiasmos*, they abandoned themselves, dancing wildly, . . . and calling "Evoï!" At that moment of intense rapture they became identified with the god himself. . . . They became filled with his spirit and acquired divine powers.<sup>17</sup>

In 187 B.C. the Roman senate sought to ban the Dionysian cult but was never fully successful. It was revived under Julius Caesar and remained in existence at least until the time of Augustine (A.D. 354–430).<sup>18</sup> The question remains whether it was widely active during the first century A.D. and especially in Corinth. Rogers has argued that the Dionysian cult had permeated the Mediterranean world at the time of Paul, and was a background to Paul's words in Ephesians 5:18.<sup>19</sup> But would it have been popular at Corinth also?

Broneer has demonstrated that Dionysus was worshiped in Corinth as early as the fourth century B.C. with a temple located in the Sacred Glen. This most likely indicates that the cult of Dionysus may have been in Corinth at the time of Paul.<sup>20</sup> Dionysus was worshiped at Delphi across the gulf from Corinth, substituting for Apollo when supposedly he was spending the winter with the Hyperboreans.<sup>21</sup> This continued at least during the time of Plutarch (A.D. 46–120)<sup>22</sup> so the Dionysian religion probably would have had some influence on Corinth.

The third major cult that may have had influence on the Corinthians was that of Apollo. Several temples in Corinth were for the worship of Apollo,<sup>23</sup> and the famous shrine at Delphi was primarily that of Apollo. The slave girl that Paul encountered in Philippi on the way to Corinth had a spirit of Python, or one inspired by Apollo.<sup>24</sup> The ecstatic tongues-speaking of the oracle and the subsequent interpretation by the priest at Delphi are widely known. The cult of Apollo was widespread in Achaia, but especially around the temple of Delphi across from Corinth. This religion easily could have provided the kind of impetus for spiritual experience found in the Corinthian church.

Greece had long experience of the utterances of the Pythian prophetess at Delphi and the enthusiastic invocations of the votaries of Dionysus. Hence Paul insists that it is not the phenomenon of "tongues" or prophesying in itself that gives evidence of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, but the actual content of the utterances.<sup>25</sup>

With the ecstasism of Dionysianism and the emphasis on tongues-speaking and oracles in the religion of Apollo, it is not surprising that some of the Corinthians carried these pagan ideas in the church at Corinth, especially the practice of glossolalia for which both of these religions are known (though the Dionysian cult did not include interpretation of the glossolalia as did that of Apollo).

## THE FAITH AND PRACTICES OF THE MYSTERIES

The mysteries were cults whose practices and secret beliefs were not shared with the uninitiated. "In view of their great importance, it is extraordinary that we know almost nothing about them. Everyone initiated had to take an oath not to reveal them and their influence was so strong that apparently no one ever did."<sup>26</sup>

Gardner is severely skeptical about reading too much into the historical data. The writers of the ancient world, the art, and inscriptions give, at most, the public and outward rites rather than the inward secrets which the initiates possessed.<sup>27</sup>

The major teaching in the mystery religions was rebirth and immortality of the initiates. Their rites were baptism, dedication, and the sacramental meals. These are discussed in several sources.<sup>28</sup> The primary concern in this article is the ecstatic nature of their worship. Fortunately, since ecstasy was not part of their secret rites, a fairly accurate knowledge of this aspect of the cults is available.

"The mystery-cults of the empire were designed to induce both higher and lower forms of ecstatic feeling."<sup>29</sup> The expression of the ecstatic state took various forms, such as gashing one's flesh, dancing nude in a frenzy, and speaking in ecstatic utterance. The latter was the means whereby the devotees sought to have communion with the saving deity. Here the significance of the term "glossolalia," or "speaking in tongues," comes to the fore. "The gift of tongues and of their interpretation was not peculiar to the Christian Church, but was a repetition in it of a phrase common in ancient religions. The very phrase *glossais lalein*, 'to speak with tongues,' was not invented by the New Testament writers, but borrowed from ordinary speech."<sup>30</sup>

### The Influence of the Pagan Cults on Glossolalia in the Church at Corinth

To what degree did the mystery cults affect thinking and worship of the Corinthian church, and how did that influence Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 12–14?

If the church was affected by these pagan cults, one would expect to see evidence of these in Paul's letter, for example, certain allusions or terms that the Corinthians or Paul used. One must not assume that Paul was fluent in mystery terminology,

but he certainly was aware of those terms which were in common circulation, as Kennedy properly postulates.

We cannot picture [Paul] engrossed in the cure of souls without recognizing that he must have gained a deep insight into the earlier spiritual aspirations of his converts, and the manner in which they had sought to satisfy them. Even apart from eager inquirers, a missionary so zealous and daring would often find himself confronted by men and women who still clung to their mystic ritual and all the hopes it had kindled. It was inevitable, therefore, that he should become familiar, at least from the outside, with religious ideas current in these influential cults.<sup>31</sup>

#### SIMILAR TERMINOLOGY WITH THE MYSTERIES

*Instruments in worship.* Paul wrote that the ability to "speak with the tongues of men and of angels" without love is no better than his being "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1). This may be an allusion to the use of these instruments in the mystery cults. These instruments were used to produce the ecstatic condition that provided the emotional intoxication needed to experience the sacramental celebration.<sup>32</sup> This is especially true in Dionysianism.<sup>33</sup> Failure to evidence love in the expression of the gifts would be as meaningless as their former pagan rites.

*The spiritual one* (πνευματικός). Paul contrasted the πνευματικός, one who has the Spirit, with the ψυχικός, the one devoid of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:10–3:4). The pneumatic character of worship in the mystery religions was always connected with states of ecstasy, whereas Paul never seems to make this connection. To him the possession of the πνεῦμα is the normal, abiding condition of the Christian. The special meaning of πνευματικός and πνευματικά to the Corinthians was mainly due to their ecstatic emphases, especially the phenomenon of speaking with tongues.

*Mystery* (μυστήριον). The term *mystery* is used in the New Testament but with a different force (except for possibly 1 Cor. 14:2). Hay clarifies the difference between these two usages.

In the New Testament it refers to the things of God that could not be known by man except through revelation from God. The revelation given of these things by the Holy Spirit is not obscure but clear and is given to be communication to God's people (1 Cor. 2:1-16). It is not given privately in unknown words. In heathen religions this word referred to the hidden secrets of the gods which only the initiated could know. Those initiated into such mysteries claimed to have contact with the spirit world through emotional excitement, revelations, the working of miracles and the speaking of unknown

words revealed by the spirits. In the New Testament Church every Christian is initiated.<sup>34</sup>

Possibly Paul spoke of these mysteries when he wrote that "one who speaks in a tongue . . . speaks mysteries" (1 Cor. 14:2). If this is not an allusion to mystery terminology, it is certainly not a commendation from the apostle.

#### SIMILAR ATTITUDES IN WORSHIP

*Self-centered worship.* Ecstatic religion by its very nature is self-oriented. Christians were to use their Christian *χαρίσματα* for the common good, but the pagans were totally concerned about their own personal experience, an attitude also prevalent among Corinthian Christians.

*Women in worship.* Women had an important place in the mystery cults, especially in the emotional and vocal realm. This was especially true in the Dionysian cult. Livy in his *History of Rome* wrote that the majority of Dionysian worshippers were women.<sup>35</sup> The practice in the early Christian church and in the synagogue from which the church derived much of its order was for the women not to participate much in the vocal activities of the community. This aspect of the pagan cult could be what Paul was counteracting in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36.<sup>36</sup> The believers were to conform to the practice of all the congregations of God in having vocal expressions limited to men. Also the use of *ἄνδρας* ("males") rather than *ἄνθρωπους* ("men") in regard to public prayer (1 Tim. 2:8) may give evidence of the consistency of this custom.

*The Daemon (δαίμονιον).* The desire or at least reverence for the *δαίμονιον* may be seen in the Corinthian church. In their pagan past the spirit would enable them to come into contact with the supernatural and to experience a oneness with the god in the state of ecstasy. These same attitudes existed among believers at Corinth. They had difficulty in accepting the fact that an idol (behind whom was a *δαίμονιον*) was nothing and that meat sacrificed to an idol was just meat (1 Cor. 8:1-7). They were zealous for spirits (1 Cor. 14:12). Some have said that *πνεῦμα* here is synonymous with "spiritual gifts," but this is an unlikely use of *πνεῦμα*. Also 1 Corinthians 12:1-3 demonstrates that they were not distinguishing the difference between speaking by the Spirit of God and speaking by means of the *δαίμονιον* in their previous pagan worship, by whom they were led to false worship.

*Ecstasy.* Ecstasy was common in all mystery religions. The reason for this common experience is well stated by Nilsson:

Not every man can be a miracle-worker and a seer, but most are susceptible to ecstasy, especially as members of a great crowd, which draws the individual along with it and generates in him the sense of being filled with a higher, divine power. This is the literal meaning of the Greek word "enthusiasm," the state in which "god is in man." The rising tide of religious feeling seeks to surmount the barrier which separates man from god, it strives to enter into the divine, and it finds ultimate satisfaction only in that quenching of the consciousness in enthusiasm which is the goal of all mysticism.<sup>37</sup>

Unquestionably the Corinthian church was involved in ecstasy though many scholars today would not concede that they spoke ecstatic utterances.

#### GLOSSOLALIA IN THE CULT AND IN THE CHURCH

Speaking in tongues was not unique to the Christian faith. This phenomenon existed in various religions. "There also the *pneumatikos*, by whatever name he might be called, was a familiar figure. As possessed by the god, or partaking of the Divine *pneuma* or *nous*, he too burst forth into mysterious ejaculations and rapt utterances of the kind described in the New Testament as *glossai lalein*."<sup>38</sup>

Possibly the carnal Corinthians, recent converts from the pagan religions, were failing to distinguish between the ecstatic utterance of their past and the true gift of tongues given supernaturally by the Holy Spirit.

There can be little question that the glossolalia in the Book of Acts were languages. The problem lies in the nature of tongues in 1 Corinthians. Gundry has forcefully argued that tongues in Acts and 1 Corinthians are intelligible, human languages.<sup>39</sup> The major problem with this view, in reference to Corinth, is given by Smith:

If speaking in tongues involved a supernatural speech in a real language, then every such utterance required a direct miracle by God. This would mean, in the case of the Corinthians, that God was working a miracle at the wrong time and wrong place! He was causing that which He was directing the Apostle Paul to curtail.<sup>40</sup>

Is there a point of reconciliation for this contradiction? One may be that Paul used *γλῶσσα* for both ecstatic utterance and human language in 1 Corinthians, much as people do today with

the term. One may wonder why Paul did not use *μάντις* when he referred to ecstatic utterance, but his method of argumentation may give the answer to this. Another possibility is given in Gundry's own article.

Even if it were admitted that ecstatic utterance such as was practiced in Hellenistic religion was invading Corinthian Church meetings, *Paul would be condemning it by presenting normative Christian glossolalia as something radically different in style as well as in content.*<sup>41</sup>

### Pneumatika and Charismata in Paul's Theology

#### PAULINE ARGUMENTS

In seeking to lead the Corinthian Christians to a proper understanding of the workings of the Spirit, especially the gift of tongues, Paul used several methods of argumentation. Rather than speaking immediately against their practice in the meetings, he desired to find a common ground of departure, endeavoring to bring them to his position at the end. This procedure was recognized by Chadwick.

The entire drift of the argument of 1 Cor. xii-xiv is such as to pour a douche of ice-cold water over the whole practice. But Paul could hardly have denied that the gift of tongues was a genuine supernatural *charisma* without putting a fatal barrier between himself and the Corinthian enthusiasts. . . . [for] the touchstone of soundness in the eyes of those claiming to be possessed by the Spirit was whether their gift was recognized to be a genuine work of God. To deny this recognition was to prove oneself to be altogether lacking in the Spirit. That Paul was fully aware of this issue appears not only from 1 Cor. ii. 14-15, but also from 1 Cor. xiv. 37-8, a masterly sentence which has the effect of brilliantly forestalling possible counter-attack at the most dangerous point, and indeed carries the war into the enemy camp. To have refused to recognize the practice as truly supernatural would have been catastrophic. Paul must fully admit that *glossolalia* is indeed a divine gift; but, he urges, it is the most inferior of all gifts. But Paul does more than admit it. He asserts it: *eucharisto to theo, panton humon mallon glossais lalo* (xiv 18). No stronger assertion of his belief in the validity of this gift of the Spirit could be made; and in the context it is a master touch which leaves the enthusiasts completely outclassed and outmaneuvered on their own ground.<sup>42</sup>

Many of Paul's statements, then, should perhaps be recognized as conciliatory rather than commendatory. The statement, "One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself" (1 Cor. 14:4) is not

commendatory. Paul merely conceded a point here for argument. He did not affirm the legitimacy of that believer's experience as from the Holy Spirit. One might even say that irony is to be found in Paul's statement.

It should be carefully noted that if Paul is not using irony here, then he is crediting very carnal believers with an intimacy with the Holy Spirit and with God, with deep spiritual experiences, that all his other writings, and all the rest of Scripture, teach most emphatically can never be entered into by a carnal believer. . . . He is using irony as a weapon to lay bare the emptiness of the claims of carnal believers.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, if Paul's statement is one of truth, not irony, then it contradicts 1 Corinthians 12:7, that grace-gifts (*χαρίσματα*) are "for the common good," and also 13:1-3, that gifts are not to be self-centered. Paul also used irony in 1 Corinthians 4:8-10.

Usually scholars have taken the *πνευματικοί* in 1 Corinthians 12:1 to refer to the spiritual gifts Paul mentions in that chapter (vv. 8-10, 28-30). There is good reason, though, to consider it instead as a technical term of the Corinthians for "one who speaks in tongues" or "speaking in tongues." Paul adopted the Corinthian terms and clichés at other points, it appears,<sup>44</sup> and it would seem to be equally true here. In other places (1 Cor. 2:14-15) Paul sees all Christians as *πνευματικοί* and non-Christians as *ψυχικοί*, but here (1 Cor. 12) the word takes on a special meaning which probably reflects the enthusiasts' use of the term for one who speaks in tongues.

Certainly such use is in harmony with usage in the mystery cults, from which these Corinthians derived their initial religious thinking. A further evidence of this specific meaning for *πνευματικός* is that 1 Corinthians 12:2-3 concern "speaking by the Spirit of God." As well, the term is used again in 14:1-3, to contrast the one who prophesies with the one who speaks in tongues. In addition, 14:37 without doubt uses *πνευματικός* as a definite term for a tongues-speaker. The verse could be translated, "The prophet or the one with the gift of tongues. . . ," since this is the contrast throughout Paul's argument.<sup>45</sup>

Paul sought to demonstrate that the specific pneumatic utterances of the Corinthians should conform to the *χαρίσματα* of the Holy Spirit. Tongues, as a *χάρισμα*, had a specific purpose in God's program (1 Cor. 14:21-22) but not in the manner which the Corinthians supposed, for personal edification or to show "possession by the god."

## PAULINE CORRECTIVES

One would not want to intimate that all tongues-speaking in the church at Corinth was illegitimate. Ervin poignantly speaks to those who would categorically parallel glossolalia at Corinth to the mysteries. "Behind this glib assumption is the erroneous a priori that superficial correlation proves mutual causation."<sup>46</sup>

Though Ervin is basically correct in his observation, nevertheless there is good evidence that the Corinthian church included members who were affected by their pagan past. Paul prefaced his answer to the Corinthians' question about "spirituals" (περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν) with a reference to their religious history. He did not want them to be ignorant of the spirituals, "because you know that when you were led away toward speechless idols as you would be unconsciously led" (1 Cor. 12:21, author's translation). Since the Corinthians had a background of ecstatic (and so-called "spiritual") religion, the apostle felt it necessary to instruct them that the spirituals of which he would be writing were not of the same class.

The very characteristic of the Corinthians' heathen past, [Paul] argues, was the sense of being overpowered and carried away by spiritual forces. . . . "There is no doubt at all," Schrenk comments, "that Paul intends to say here, The truly spiritual is not marked by a being swept away . . . that was precisely the characteristic of your previous fanatical religion." It is important to notice that Paul places this valuation of the spiritually "sweeping" at the very outset of his treatment of "spiritual things" in Corinth. As the superscription to his essay in chapters twelve to fourteen Paul has written: Seizure is not necessarily Christian or paramountly spiritual.<sup>47</sup>

That the Corinthians leaned toward their pagan past in the mysteries as a means of spiritual expression may be also seen in 1 Corinthians 14:12, "Since you are zealous of spiritual gifts" (lit., "spirits," πνευμάτων). Gerlicher rightly observes, "This implies that their present devotion was to spiritual matters per se, independent of Christ-centered worship and congregational-oriented edification."<sup>48</sup>

Did the apostle recognize any of the tongues-speaking at Corinth as being genuine? Was there, in other words, a genuine gift of tongues distinguishable from the counterfeit manifestations (that were demonic in nature)?

Paul gave several guidelines for glossolalia, showing how to differentiate between the true and false manifestations. In light of his statement that the Corinthians had been uncontrollably

driven in their pagan worship, Paul wrote, "Wherefore I am making known to you that no one speaking in the Spirit of God says, Jesus is Anathema" (1 Cor. 12:3, author's translation). In their former pagan frenzies they did not have control over themselves and so some might have felt that now speaking (presumably) in the Spirit of God (in this context glossolalia) they would call Jesus cursed. However, this mystery cult practice was to be exposed by Paul.<sup>49</sup> Whoever says "Jesus is Anathema" is obviously not being controlled by the Spirit of God. The lordship of Jesus is the criterion by which pneumatic utterances are to be judged as genuine or false.<sup>50</sup>

In the pagan glossolalia, no thought was given to the harmony of participants in group worship. Only the individual experience was important. Paul wrote that unity is a sign of the Spirit's activity. "All do not speak with tongues, do they?" (1 Cor. 12:30). "If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret" (14:27). A true manifestation by the Spirit would be orderly, "for God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (14:33).

Another method of discerning genuine from cultic or demonically inspired ecstasy was self-control.

Tongues were to be manifested in the public worship when accompanied by the companion gift of interpretation. Prophesying was subject to the discernment of the order of prophets. In every case, self-control is the dominant note, for "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." Contemporary descriptions take note of the fact that such self-control was totally lacking in the orgiastic ecstasies of the mystery cults. Hence, these safeguards would protect the church by distinguishing the counterfeit from the genuine manifestations of the Holy Spirit.<sup>51</sup>

Another factor which distinguishes the true from the false concerns the person who speaks in tongues. Paul says, "If anyone seems to be a prophet or a glossolalist, let him recognize what I am writing that it is a commandment of the Lord. If anyone does not know (ἀγνοεῖ), he is without knowledge (ἀγνοεῖται)" (1 Cor. 14:37-38, author's translation). Paul was possibly being satirical here since pneumatics felt themselves spiritually and knowledgeably superior. If anyone did not submit to the apostolic Word, it was proof that his manifestations were false.

Paul gave the previous safeguards so that the spurious tongues would fall away, since they would be recognized as false by not agreeing with the guidelines he set. The true gift of

tongues would then properly operate in alignment with the other gifts of the Spirit and edify the body of Christ.

One might ask what proof there is that there really was a legitimate gift of tongues in the Corinthian church. First, Paul gave rules to regulate the gift. Why give rules for it if it were not even in existence? Since there was a mixture of the true and the false, Paul gave a way to distinguish them rather than forbidding tongues outright.

Second, in 14:26 he showed how *χαρίσματα* involves more than tongues. "When you gather together, each one has a psalm, each one has a teaching, each one has a revelation, each one has a tongue, each one has an interpretation" (author's translation).<sup>52</sup>

Third, Paul gave the injunction "Stop forbidding speaking in tongues" (14:39). Paul wanted tongues, which seemed to be the main problem at Corinth, to continue. Moffatt says, "Some soberminded Christians in the local church, as at Thessalonica, evidently were shocked; they desired to check the habit (xiv. 39)."<sup>53</sup> In light of the mystery religions Ervin presents a more plausible viewpoint:

There is another possible reconstruction of events in Corinth that fits the facts. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the "sober-minded Christians," postulated by Dr. Moffatt, with or without the cooperation of Gnostic elements of more speculative bent of mind, may have initiated the prohibition of tongues in the worship of the assembly. Alarmed at the patently unspiritual excesses of Gnostic[?] "ecstatics," and not being able to cope with such counterfeit manifestations, they may have consented to the radical expedient of forbidding all "spiritual" manifestations. The expedient may have represented a counsel of despair which Paul sought to counter by reinstating tongues and prophesying to their proper place in the worship of the church where "each one hath a psalm, hath a teaching, hath a revelation, hath a tongue, hath an interpretation."<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

Corinth was experience-oriented and self-oriented. Mystery religions and other pagan cults were in great abundance, from which cults many of the members at the Corinthian church received their initial religious instruction. After being converted they had failed to free themselves from pagan attitudes and they confused the true work of the Spirit of God with the former pneumatic and ecstatic experiences of the pagan religions, espe-

cially the Dionysian mystery or the religion of Apollo. By careful and delicate argumentation Paul sought to help these believers recognize their errors and operate all the *χαρίσματα* (gifts of the Spirit) not just the *πνευματικά* (tongues). Also he desired that they perform the *χαρίσματα* for the edification of the body of Christ, not self.

### Notes

1 For example, Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1890); Richard Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978). For a discussion on proper methodology in studying the mystery religions see Bruce Metzger, "Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity," in *Historical and Literary Studies, Pagan, Jewish, and Christian*, vol. 8, *New Testament Tools and Studies* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), pp. 1-24. Bruce Metzger's *A Classified Bibliography of the Graeco-Roman Mystery Religions 1924-1973* (forthcoming) will be an important tool for mystery religion research.

2 Walter Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 141-301. That there are elements of Gnosticism at Corinth is certain, but this is due not to accepting a system of beliefs but to the intermixing of ideas in the Hellenistic Age. All the developed systems of thought in the first-century Mediterranean world are the children of one mother — Hellenistic syncretism. Yamauchi discusses Gnosticism versus incipient Gnosticism in the first century A.D. (Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973]). The weakness of Yamauchi's work is the lack of interaction with primary Gnostic sources.

3 Bruce says, "It would be anachronistic to call these [enthusiasts at Corinth] 'men of the Spirit' Gnostics; that is a term best reserved for adherents of the various schools of Gnosticism which flourished in the second century A.D. (F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977], p. 261).

4 Carl Clemen, *Religions of the World*, trans. A. K. Dallas (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1931), p. 342; cf. Carl Clemen, *Der Einfluss der Mysterienreligionen auf das älteste Christentum* (Gieszen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann, 1913), p. 86.

5 Karl Heussi, *Kompendium der Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1957), p. 75.

6 P. D. Pahl, "The Mystery Religions," *Australian Theological Review* 20 (June 1949): 20.

7 A. S. Geden, *Mithraism* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1925), p. 4; cf. also for this view Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), p. 259.

8 Albert Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters*, trans. G. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan Co., 1950), p. 189.

9 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Mystery Religions, Greco-Oriental," by Karl Pruemmm, pp. 163-64.

10 Bruce Metzger, "Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity," *Historical and Literary Studies, Pagan, Jewish, and Christian* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), p. 11.

11 Frederick C. Grant, "Greek Religion in the Hellenistic-Roman Age," *Anglican Theological Review* 33 (1951):26.

- 12 S. A. Cook, F. E. Adcock, and M. P. Charlesworth, *The Augustan Empire: 44 B.C.—A.D. 70*, vol. 10, *The Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 504.
- 13 *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "Mysteries," by P. Gardner, 9:81.
- 14 H. J. Rose, *Religion in Greece and Rome* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 278.
- 15 Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 56.
- 16 George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963), p. 450.
- 17 Peter Hoyle, *Delphi* (London: Cassel & Co., 1967), p. 76.
- 18 Martin P. Nilsson, "The Bacchic Mysteries of the Roman Age," *Harvard Theological Review* 46 (October 1953):175-85.
- 19 Cleon L. Rogers, "The Dionysian Background of Ephesians 5:18," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (July–September 1979):249-57.
- 20 Oscar Broneer, "Paul and the Pagan Cults at Isthmia," *Harvard Theological Review* 44 (1971):182.
- 21 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 161.
- 22 Hoyle, *Delphi*, p. 73.
- 23 Oscar Broneer, "Corinth," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 14 (1951):84.
- 24 Apollo was worshiped as the Pythian god at the shrine of Delphi (known also as Pytho). He was especially associated with oracles (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954], p. 332).
- 25 Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p. 260.
- 26 Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (New York: Time, 1930), p. 275.
- 27 *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 9:77.
- 28 In addition to the sources given in this article see: Samuel Dill, *Roman Society: From Nero to Marcus Aurelius* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1956); *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Mystery Religions, Greco-Oriental," by Karl Pruemmm pp. 153-64; also the thorough bibliography in *Sourcebook of Texts for the Comparative Study of the Gospels*, ed. David L. Dungan and David R. Cartlidge, 3d ed. (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973).
- 29 *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "Ecstasy," by W. R. Inge, 5:158.
- 30 *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1911), s.v. "Gift of Tongues," by Fredrick C. Conybeare, 27:10.
- 31 H. A. A. Kennedy, *St. Paul and the Mystery Religions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.), pp. 280-81.
- 32 Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), p. 240.
- 33 "They represent them, one and all, as a kind of inspired people and as subject to Bacchic [Dyonysian] frenzy, and, in the guise of minister, as inspiring terror at the celebration of the sacred rites by means of wardances accompanied by uproar and noise and cymbals and drums and also by flute and outcry. . . ." This was stated by Strabo. (Richard Kroeger and Catherine Kroeger, "Pandemonium and Silence at Corinth," *The Reformed Journal* 28 [June 1978]:7).
- 34 Alexander Rattray Hay, *What Is Wrong in the Church?* vol. 2, *Counterfeit Speaking in Tongues* (Audubon, NJ: New Testament Missionary Union, n.d.), p. 26.
- 35 Cited from Kroeger and Kroeger, "Pandemonium and Silence," p. 7.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- 37 Martin P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1964), p. 205.
- 38 Kennedy, *St. Paul and the Mystery Religions*, p. 160.
- 39 Robert H. Gundry, "'Ecstatic Utterance' (N.E.B.)?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (October 1966):299-307.
- 40 Charles R. Smith, *Tongues in Biblical Perspective* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1973), p. 26.

- 41 Gundry, "Ecstatic Utterance (N.E.B.)?" p. 305 (italics added).
- 42 Cited from D. W. B. Robinson, "Charismata versus Pneumatika: Paul's Method of Discussion," *Reformed Theological Review* 21 (May-August 1972):49-50.
- 43 Hay, *What Is Wrong in the Church?* p. 43.
- 44 Hurd lists several slogans possibly used by the Corinthians which Paul quoted from their letter to him. To each of these Paul gave a swift correction (John Hurd, *The Origin of I Corinthians* [New York: Seabury Press, 1965], p. 67):  
 6:12; 10:23 "All things are lawful."  
 6:13 "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food."  
 7:1 "It is well for a man not to touch a woman."  
 8:1 "All of us possess knowledge."  
 8:4 "An idol has no real existence. There is no God but one."  
 8:5-6 "For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords') yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom we exist and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."  
 8:8 "Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do."  
 11:2 "We remember you in everything and maintain the traditions even as you delivered them to us [reversing the pronouns]." Those statements that seem to be from the Corinthians are 6:12 (10:23); 6:13; 7:1; 8:1; 11:2. The NIV indicates that most of these are statements that Paul quotes. Also the un-Pauline use of πνευματικὸς in 1 Corinthians 12:1; 14:1-5; and 14:37 indicates a similar device. Especially is this true in 12:1, which Paul immediately follows with a correction.
- 45 Πνευματικοί in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is always in a speaking context (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1; 14:1, 37). Also there is obviously a contrast between πνευματικά and προφητεῖαι in 14:1 and the connected contrast between γλώσση and προφητεύων in the following two verses. Pearson is typical of seeing πνευματικῶν of 12:1 as equal to χαρισμάτων in 12:4 (Birger Albert Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology in 1 Corinthians* [Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, Dissertation Series no. 12, 1973], p. 50). Ellis narrows the term to prophetic gifts of inspired speech and discernment and not simply equivalent to χαρίσματα (E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics in Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978], pp. 24, 68).
- 46 Howard M. Ervin, *These Are Not Drunken as Ye Suppose* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1968), p. 125.
- 47 Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 286-87.
- 48 John Stanley Gerlicher, "An Exegetical Approach to First Corinthians Twelve to Fourteen" (Th.M. thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1966), pp. 24-25.
- 49 Origen, *Contra Celsum* (written about A.D. 246), noted that the Orphites asked those who would enter their churches to curse Jesus (F. Godet, *Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. A. Cusin, 2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957], 2:187).
- 50 Anthony David Palma, "Tongues and Prophecy — A Comparative Study in Charismata" (S.T.M. thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, 1966), p. 72. See also William F. Orr and James Arthur Walter, *1 Corinthians*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976), p. 278.
- 51 Ervin, *These Are Not Drunken as Ye Suppose*, p. 200.
- 52 This writer takes ἕκαστος here in the distributive sense.
- 53 James Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Brothers, n.d.), p. 211.
- 54 Ervin, *These Are Not Drunken as Ye Suppose*, p. 200.



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.