

THE GIFT OF TONGUES: COMPARING THE CHURCH FATHERS WITH CONTEMPORARY PENTECOSTALISM

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Though the church fathers, who lived shortly after the apostles, said relatively little about the gift of tongues, what they did say furnishes a helpful comparison with what contemporary Pentecostalism says about the gift. They did not believe that every Christian received the gift, but they believed that the Holy Spirit, not the human spirit, chose who would have the gift. They held that the gift's ideal use was to benefit the entire community, not the speaker. For them, benefitting others enhanced the importance of interpretation so that others could be edified. In contrast to early views of the gift, Pentecostal writers of the twentieth-century have given a high profile to the gift. In further contrast, modern writers have not limited the gift to messages in actual human languages as did early writers. They further differ with the early fathers in teaching that all Christians should have the gift as evidence of progress in their Christian lives. The Pentecostal view is that speaking in tongues can be a learned human behavior rather than a genuine gift of the Holy Spirit—a further difference from the early fathers. Relief from personal stress and self-edification of the tongues-speaker is the primary purpose of tongues in the eyes of Pentecostals, not the edification of others through interpretation of the tongues message as it was with the fathers. Contemporary Pentecostalism thus differs from ancient Christianity in fundamental aspects in its view of the gift of tongues.

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A question that has been the center of heated debate in the last century of evangelical scholarship is, "When did the gift of tongues cease?" On the one hand, cessationists argue that tongues ceased somewhere after the first century. Pentecostal scholars disagree, contending that the charismatic gifts only declined (or continued sporadically) throughout church history, finally and fully resurfacing in the early twentieth century.

The Perspective of Patristic Writers

To support their views, both sides turn to the church fathers. In citing

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patristic literature, they attempt to demonstrate either the cessation or the continuation of the charismatic gifts (depending on their perspective). Yet, because the emphasis is so often placed on *when* the fathers thought tongues ceased, inadequate attention has been given to *what* the fathers thought tongues were. The purpose of this study is to discover what the church fathers understood the nature and function of tongues-speaking to be, and then to compare that understanding with the contemporary Pentecostal viewpoint.

Did the church fathers understand tongues-speaking to consist primarily of ecstatic, spiritual (non-human) speech for the purpose of self-edification (as Pentecostals would typically understand tongues today)? Or did they define the gift as the supernatural ability to speak previously unstudied foreign languages for the purpose of evangelism and for the edification of others (as cessationists would generally define the gift)? In other words, how did the earliest Christians, those living soon after the apostles, describe the proper operation of the gift as they understood it. And, once identified, how does this patristic definition of tongues compare with the modern Pentecostal position? If the two are complementary, then it seems appropriate (as a subsequent study) to determine if and when tongues ceased in church history. On the other hand, if the two are mutually exclusive, then the timing discussion becomes somewhat unnecessary in the debate, since the modern phenomenon does not match the apostolic gift anyway.¹

Regarding the Nature of Tongues-Speaking

In spite of a relative de-emphasis placed on tongues-speaking by the church fathers (who speak of prophecy much more than they do of tongues), they are not altogether silent on the issue. In fact, their collective writings overwhelmingly suggest that they associate tongues-speaking with a supernatural ability to speak rational, authentic foreign languages. That proposition is directly supported by Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Hegemonius, Gregory of Nazianzen, Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom, Augustine, Leo the Great, and implied by others (such as Tertullian and Origen).² Such a position is further strengthened by the fathers' equation of the Acts 2 use of the gift with the Corinthian phenomenon³ (as well as their allusions to Isaiah

¹A comparison of modern-day tongues-speaking with the NT data is beyond the scope of this study. Many cessationists have argued that the Pentecostal understanding of tongues does not match the biblical description of the gift (cf. John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] 270-79, or Thomas Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996]) 165-200. Others disagree (cf. Larry Christenson, "Bypassing the Mind," in *The Holy Spirit in Today's Church*, ed. Erling Jornstad [Nashville: Abingdon, 1973] 87; Don Basham, "The Value of Speaking in Tongues," in *The Holy Spirit in Today's Church*, ed. Erling Jornstad [Nashville: Abingdon, 1973] 79; or Wayne Grudem, "Should Christians Expect Miracles Today," in *The Kingdom and the Power*, eds. Gary S. Greig and Kevin N. Springer [Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1993] 71).

²Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.1; Hegemonius, *The Acts of Archelaus* 37; Gregory of Nazianzen, *The Oration on Pentecost* 15-17; Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, see his comments on 1 Cor 13:1; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians* 35.1; Augustine, *The Letters of Petilian, the Donatist* 2.32.74; Leo the Great, *Sermons* 75.2; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.8; Origen, "Preface," *Origen de Principiis* 3.1.

³Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Hegemonius, Ambrose, and Chrysostom closely associate the work of the apostles on Pentecost with the gift as described in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Regarding 1 Cor 12:7, Theodoret of Cyrus is especially clear: "Paul chooses speaking in tongues as his example because the Corinthians thought that it was the greatest of the gifts. This was because it had been given to the apostles on the day of Pentecost, before any of the others" (*Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 243, cited from *1-2 Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999) [hereafter "ACCS"] 121).

28:11 when discussing the NT gift). In several instances, they import their understanding of Acts 2 and Isaiah 28:11 (both of which speak of human foreign languages) into their interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12–14. Yet, they never suggest that the tongues experienced by the apostles at Pentecost were different from the tongues experienced by the Corinthian believers.

Moreover, the patristic writers never hint at the possibility of two types of tongues-speaking.⁴ Rather, they consistently present the gift as a solitary ability—both in its nature and function. In their minds, the only difference between public and private tongues-speaking is that the latter is not interpreted.⁵

Thus, the patristic evidence supports a rational foreign language as the proper and normal manifestation of tongues.⁶ Conversely, unintelligible babblings and irrational gibberish are never associated with the gift.⁷

⁴John Chrysostom (*Homilies on First Corinthians* 29.1) recognized that everyone who was baptized in Acts 10 and 19 spoke in tongues. He also recognized that, according to 1 Cor 12:30, not every Christian was expected to speak in tongues (see *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 32.4). Yet, this apparent incongruity did not lead Chrysostom to argue for two kinds of tongues-speaking (one devotional and the other public). Instead, he saw the phenomenon in Acts (in both its nature and function) as identical with that in Corinthians.

⁵Ideally, of course, all tongues-speech was to be interpreted for the edification of the church (see discussion below). If, however, no interpretation was possible, the message was to be kept private since, without an interpretation, it was of no value to the rest of the congregation.

⁶Occasional references are also made to the tongues of angels (usually in the context of commenting on 1 Cor 13:1). The implication, however, is that the ability to converse in an angelic tongue is the exception (not the rule); and that the angelic languages (like human languages) consist of rational messages that can be interpreted. Even the apocrypha of the second century supports tongues as foreign languages. Cf. Harold Hunter, “Tongues-Speech: A Patristic Analysis,” *JETS* 23/2 (June 1980):126. The second-century apocrypha also contains one instance in which a human converses in rational language with an angel.

⁷Some Pentecostals attempt to identify the ecstatic behavior of the Montanists with the gift of tongues. Cf. Ronald A. N. Kydd, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendricksen, 1984) 34-36. But not only are there different ways to understand the passages that discuss Montanist behavior (as to whether or not their behavior actually corresponds to contemporary Pentecostal glossolalia), the Montanists themselves were considered a heretical sect by the orthodox Christians of that time. The testimony of the Montanists, then, is highly suspect.

Pentecostals also cite Celsus to argue that the gift of tongues included “strange, fanatical, and quite unintelligible words, of which no rational person can find the meaning: for so dark are they, as to have no meaning at all; but they give occasion to every fool or impostor to apply them to suit his own purposes” (Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.9, cited from Roberts, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 4:614). At first glance, Celsus is apparently accusing Christian prophets of nonsensical gibberish and irrational mutterings (possibly glossolalia?). Yet, Origen’s response to those accusations suggests that it is the *content* of the messages that Celsus finds unintelligible (and not the *utterances* themselves). Origen says,

The prophets have therefore, as God commanded them, declared with all plainness those things which it was desirable that the hearers should understand at once for the regulation of their conduct; while in regard to deeper and more mysterious subjects, which lay beyond the reach of the common understanding, they set them forth in the form of enigmas and allegories, or of what are called dark sayings, parables, or similitudes. And this plan they have followed, that those who are ready to shun no labor and spare no pains in their endeavors after truth and virtue might search into their meaning, and having found it, might apply it as reason requires. But Celsus, ever vigorous in his denunciations, as though he were angry at his inability to understand the language of the prophets, scoffs at them (Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.10, cited from Roberts, *ANF* 4:614).

Celsus’s complaint, then, is not that the prophets utter nonhuman gibberish. But rather that the *content* of their messages was “in the form of enigmas and allegories” (meaning riddles and stories) and “parables and similitudes.” Thus, the meaning of their words (and not the words themselves) were difficult for the outside observer to understand. Origen even implies that with some diligent effort, the outside observer could “search into their meaning,” find that meaning, and “apply it as reason requires.” Such would only be possible if the sayings themselves were given in intelligible language. From Origen’s

Regarding the Extent of Tongues-Speaking

The patristic writings further evidence that all Christians did not speak in tongues. Not only did none of the church fathers claim to speak in tongues personally, they consistently expressed their belief that not every Christian receives that gift (or any one gift, for that matter). Clement of Alexandria explains that “each [believer] has his own proper gift of God—one in one way, another in another.”⁸ Hippolytus is even more explicit: “It is not necessary that every one of the faithful should cast out demons, raise the dead, or speak with tongues. But only such a one who has been graciously given this gift—for the purpose that it may be advantageous to the salvation of unbelievers.”⁹ Ambrose echoes, “Not all, says he, have the gift of healings, nor do all, says he, speak with tongues. For the whole of the divine gifts cannot exist in each several man.”¹⁰ And Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine, and Theodoret of Cyrus agree.¹¹ The chorus of evidence is overwhelming. The church fathers did not believe that every believer received the same spiritual endowment from the Holy Spirit.¹² Some were gifted with tongues while others were gifted in other ways.

Regarding the Acquisition of Tongues-Speaking

The church fathers also viewed tongues-speaking as a supernatural gift. No amount of human exertion, initiation, or training could aid in acquiring what was endowed only by the Holy Spirit.

Irenaeus makes it clear that those who “speak in all languages” do so only “through the Spirit of God.”¹³ True signs are done in “the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” rather than “by means of angelic invocations, incantations, or any other wicked curious art.”¹⁴ Origen even argues that the same Spirit who gives the gift can also take it away.¹⁵ After all, the “substance of the gifts . . . owes its actual existence

response, then, it is clear that an incoherent form of gibberish is not in view. As Christopher Forbes (*Prophecy and Inspired Speech* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997] 168) says, “There are major objections against the view that Celsus’s report of prophetic utterance at the end of the second century in Palestine provides us with a parallel for early Christian glossolalia.”

⁸Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.21, cited from David Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999) 300.

⁹*Apostolic Constitutions* 7.479, cited from Bercot, *Dictionary* 303.

¹⁰Ambrose, *Of the Holy Spirit* 2.13.149-152, cited from Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, 10:134.

¹¹John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians* 32.4 in reference to 1 Cor 12:30; Jerome, *Against the Pelagians* 1.16; Jerome makes a similar argument in 2.23; Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* 13.18.23. Also see *On the Trinity*, 15; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 240, cited from *1-2 Corinthians*, ACCS 117 (regarding 1 Cor 12:1).

¹²Stuart D. Currie (“Speaking in Tongues: Early Evidence Outside the New Testament,” in *Speaking in Tongues*, ed. Watson E. Mills [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986]” 105) notes that there is “no early, firsthand account of the use of such a gift by a Christian”; see also John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians* 32.4 in reference to 1 Cor 12:30; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 240, cited from *1-2 Corinthians*, ACCS 117 (regarding 1 Cor 12:1); Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* 13.18.23; see also *On the Trinity* 15; and Jerome, *Against the Pelagians* 1.16; Jerome makes a similar argument in 2.23.

¹³Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1, cited from Bercot, *Dictionary* 300.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 2.32.5.

¹⁵Origen, *Origen de Principiis* 2.10.7.

in men to the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶ Novatian and Hilary¹⁷ agree, and the words of Ambrosiaster are equally unmistakable: “Paul is emphatic in asserting that the distribution of gifts is not to be attributed to human causes as if they were achievable by men. The varied gifts of the Holy Spirit and the grace of the Lord Jesus are the work of one and the same God.”¹⁸

Thus, the gifts (including tongues) did not involve any prior human effort or ability to attain. That is not to say that speaking in tongues results in a lack of self-control,¹⁹ but rather that it truly was a gift given by the grace of God to whomever He willed.²⁰ No training, education, or personal achievement was necessary—“some spoke in tongues which they did not know and which nobody had taught them.”²¹ As Arnobius says,

By His own Power, He not only performed those miraculous deeds, . . . but He has permitted many others to attempt them and to perform them by the use of His name. . . . He chose fisherman, artisans, peasants, and unskilled persons of a similar kind, so that they, being sent through various nations, would perform all those miracles without any fraud and without any material aids.²²

Of course, Origen, Eusebius, Basil, Ambrose, and others²³ are quick to point out that the Spirit works only through those who are living holy lives. Nevertheless, the fathers are unanimous in affirming that it is the Holy Spirit, not the human spirit, that bestows and directs each of the gifts. After all, “To be pious is from any one’s good disposition; but to work wonders is from the power of Him that works them by us: the first of which respects ourselves; but the second respects God that works them, for the reasons which we have already mentioned.”²⁴

Human experience, effort, and education are irrelevant—the Spirit grants supernatural power to those, and only those, whom He chooses.

Regarding the Purpose of Tongues-Speaking

The early church fathers also understood tongues-speaking to be primarily other-oriented, rather than self-oriented. Its main purpose was to edify, encourage, and evangelize other people (both inside and outside the church). Self-edification was never viewed as the gift’s goal.

Thus, Irenaeus mentions that those who prophesy and speak in tongues do

¹⁶Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 2.6, cited from Bercot, *Dictionary* 301.

¹⁷Novatian, *On the Trinity* 29, cited from Roberts, *ANF* 5:641; Hilary, *On the Trinity* 8.29.

¹⁸Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles*, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 120 in reference to 1 Cor 12:6.

¹⁹Severian of Gabala, *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 144 in reference to 1 Cor 14:28.

²⁰See Jerome, *Against the Pelagians* 1.16; see also Augustine, *Confessions* 13.18.23.

²¹Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 240, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 117 (regarding 1 Cor. 12:1). See also, Leo the Great, *Sermons* 75.2.

²²Arnobius, *Against the Heathen* 1.50, cited from Bercot, *Dictionary* 303.

²³Origen, *Origen Against Celsus* 1.2; Eusebius, *Church History* 5.7.1; Basil, *On the Spirit* 16.37; Ambrose, *Of the Holy Spirit* 2.13.149-52.

²⁴Hippolytus, *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.1, cited from Roberts, *ANF* 7:479-80.

so for “the general benefit.”²⁵ After listing the gifts, Tertullian emphasizes that they are for the purpose of building up the body, in keeping with the two great commandments (to love God and love others).²⁶ Origen concurs, arguing that those who speak in tongues should “seek the common good of the church.”²⁷

Novatian says that the purpose of the gifts (including tongues) is to make the church “perfected and completed.”²⁸ Hilary contends that they are for the “perfecting of one body,”²⁹ the church. And the *First Epistle of Clement Concerning Virginit*y makes it perfectly clear:

With the gift, therefore, which thou hast received from our Lord, serve *thy* spiritual brethren, the prophets who know that the words which thou speakest are *those* of our Lord; and declare the gift which thou hast received in the Church for the edification of the brethren in Christ (for good and excellent are those things which help the men of God), if so be that they are truly with thee.³⁰

Basil’s point is equally apparent:

Since no one has the capacity to receive all spiritual gifts, but the grace of the Spirit is given proportionately to the faith of each, when one is living in community with others, the grace privately bestowed on each individual becomes the common possession of the others. . . . One who receives any of these gifts does not possess it for his own sake but rather for the sake of others.³¹

Ambrosiaster believes spiritual gifts should be “conducive to the good of the brotherhood.”³² Chrysostom agrees, arguing that tongues was to be “used for the edification of the whole church.”³³ John Cassian emphasizes the importance of love over any type of spiritual gift.³⁴ And Theodoret of Cyrus sums up the Corinthian error like this: “The Corinthians also did these things, but they did not use the gifts as they should have done. They were more interested in showing off than in using them for the edification of the church.”³⁵

Furthermore, the fathers indicate that the tongues-gift also served an important evangelistic purpose. For example, Hippolytus argues that

²⁵Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1, cited from Roberts, *ANF* 1:531.

²⁶Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.8.

²⁷Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 4.61-62, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 141.

²⁸Novatian, *On the Trinity* 29, cited from Roberts, *ANF* 5:641.

²⁹Hilary, *On the Trinity* 8.29-32. Hilary also references the gifts in *On the Trinity* 2.34.

³⁰*The First Epistle of Clement Concerning Virginit*y 11.

³¹Basil of Caesarea, *The Long Rules* 7, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 121.

³²Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles*, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 142 in reference to 1 Cor 14:20.

³³Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 36.5, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 144. This comment was made in reference to 1 Cor 14:27.

³⁴John Cassian, *The First Conference of Abbot Chaeromon* 12.

³⁵Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 240, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 117 in reference to 1 Cor 12:1.

It is not therefore necessary that every one of the faithful should cast out demons, or raise the dead, or speak with tongues; but such a one only who is vouchsafed this gift, for some cause which may be advantage to the salvation of the unbelievers, who are often put to shame, not with the demonstration of the world, but by the power of the signs; that is, such as are worthy of salvation: for all the ungodly are not affected by wonders; and hereof God Himself is a witness, as when He says in the law: "With other tongues will I speak to this people, and with other lips, and yet will they by no means believe."³⁶

John Chrysostom concurs: "The Corinthians thought that speaking in tongues was a great gift because it was the one which the apostles received first, and with a great display. But this was no reason to think it was the greatest gift of all. The reason the apostles got it first was because it was a sign that they were to go everywhere, preaching the gospel."³⁷ Augustine echoes this response:

In the earliest times, "the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spake [*sic*] with tongues," which they had not learned, "as the Spirit gave them utterance." These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to shew [*sic*] that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth.³⁸

This is not to say that the fathers did not recognize an element of personal benefit for the speaker. However, they make it equally clear that the intended use of the gift benefited the entire community, not just the speaker. For this to happen, the tongue had to be interpreted, leading the fathers to emphasize consistently the importance of interpretation.

Regarding the Interpretation of Tongues-Speaking

For the gift of tongues to be other-oriented, the church fathers stress that it must be interpreted. After all, if the foreign language is not translated, no one is able to understand it. The gift of interpretation is not simply optional; it is expected—thereby allowing tongues-speaking to fulfill its intended purpose.

Many of the church fathers reference the gift of interpretation, evidencing its widespread importance.³⁹ Origen, for example, says: "If the one who speaks in tongues does not have the power to interpret them, others will not understand, but he will know what he was moved by the Spirit to say. When this is understood by others as well, there will be fruit from it. Here as elsewhere, we are taught to seek the common good of the church."⁴⁰ Hilary agrees: "By the interpretation of tongues,

³⁶Hippolytus, *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.1, cited from Roberts, *ANF* 7:479-80. Others concur, including Ambrosiaster (*Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, cited from *1-2 Corinthians*, ACCS 142 in reference to 1 Cor 14:21); Hegemonius (*The Acts of Archelaus* 36); Gregory of Nazianzen (*The Oration on Pentecost* 15-17); and Leo the Great (*Sermons* 82, 83).

³⁷Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 35.1, cited from *1-2 Corinthians*, ACCS 138. This comment was made in reference to 1 Cor 14:2.

³⁸Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John* 6.10, cited from Schaff, *NPNF*, First Series 7:497-98. See also Augustine, *The Letters of Petilian, the Donatist* 2.32.74.

³⁹Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.21; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.8; Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 4.61-62; Hilary, *On the Trinity*, 8.29-32; Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, see his comments on 1 Cor 12:10; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 36.5; Augustine, *On the Trinity* 5.13; John Cassian, *The First Conference of Abbot Nesteros* 5.

⁴⁰Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 4.61-62, cited from *1-2 Corinthians*, ACCS 141.

that the faith of those that hear may not be imperiled through ignorance, since the interpreter of a tongue explains the tongue to those who are ignorant of it.”⁴¹ John Chrysostom agrees too: “Having spoken so much of tongues, that the gift is a thing unprofitable, a thing superfluous, if it have no interpreter.”⁴²

The weight of the patristic testimony not only indicates that tongues-speaking should be interpreted, it also implies that tongues-speaking consists of rational foreign languages—meaning that a true and consistent translation of the message is possible rather than an arbitrary creation of the meaning. Moreover, need for interpretation stems from the importance of edification—translating the message so that the entire congregation is benefited.

On the other hand, speech that cannot be understood may be of questionable origin. In the words of Severian of Gabala, “The person who speaks in the Holy Spirit speaks when he chooses to do so and then can be silent, like the prophets. But those who are possessed by an unclean spirit speak even when they do not want to. They say things that they do not understand.”⁴³

A Patristic Definition of Tongues-Speaking

Based on the patristic evidence, a rudimentary description of tongues (as it was understood by the church fathers) might be stated as follows: *the gift of tongues was a solitary and supernaturally endowed ability, given by the Holy Spirit to select Christians, enabling those believers to speak in previously unlearned, rational foreign languages. The intended use of the gift involved either the translation of the message (by an interpreter) for the general edification of fellow believers, or the translation of the message (by the hearer who heard it in his own tongue) for the evangelism of unbelievers.* The ability was not given to all Christians nor were they commanded to seek it. In fact, the gift does not even receive a high profile in the patristic literature (especially in comparison to the other gifts). While the fathers do discuss tongues-speaking on occasion, their writings do not highlight it as a normal part of the Christian experience.⁴⁴

⁴¹Hilary, *On the Trinity* 8.29-32.

⁴²John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 36.5, cited from Schaff, *NPNF*, First Series 12:218.

⁴³Severian of Gabala, *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 144 in reference to 1 Cor 14:28.

⁴⁴A conclusion about the patristic view on tongues-speaking should acknowledge a current controversy, even among Pentecostals, as to the relationship between Spirit-baptism and tongues-speaking in the patristics. Kilian McDonnell (“Does the Theology and Practice of the Early Church Confirm the Classical Pentecostal Understanding of Baptism in the Holy Spirit?” *Pneuma* 21/1 [Spring 1999]:115-34) argues that Spirit-baptism was central in the minds of the church fathers. But another Pentecostal author, Rick Walston (*The Speaking in Tongues Controversy* [Longwood, Fla.: Xulon, 2003] 156), admits that “the connection of the baptism in the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues” is “absent from church history.” In other words, the Pentecostal association of tongues-speaking with Spirit-baptism as a normal part of Christian experience (outside the book of Acts) lacks patristic support. “It is a little known fact among average Classical Pentecostals that the tongues-as-evidence doctrine is a relatively recent development” (ibid.).

Comparing Patristics with Contemporary Pentecostalism

Over the past century,⁴⁵ Pentecostal writings have given a very high profile to tongues-speaking, making it one of the movement's most basic and notable characteristics.

Speaking with tongues (glossolalia) is the most dramatic and spectacular of all the signs in the Pentecostal movement. . . . Among the fundamentalists and historical denominations glossolalia is not only an isolated phenomenon, but is repudiated by the communities as a whole, while for Pentecostals it remains one of the basic tenets and practices of the church.⁴⁶

Such emphasis on tongues-speaking has led many Pentecostals to see the church as consisting of two classes of Christians—those who have spoken in tongues and those who have not. Hollenweger explains: “The greater part of the Pentecostal movement within the Protestant churches seems to have taken over the Pentecostal doctrine of the two sorts of Christians, those who have been baptized in the Spirit and those who have not. The former are qualified by speaking with tongues.”⁴⁷ Stated another way, only those who are spiritually mature, having totally yielded themselves to God, are enabled to speak in tongues. Anyone else is, by default, considered less mature in the Christian faith. Pentecostal proponents argue, “For many people, speaking in tongues is the first time they have yielded a little of themselves into God's hands. It is the first time they have said they were willing to go all the way with the Lord and meant it!”⁴⁸ Thus, because the gift of tongues equates with religious sincerity and personal faithfulness, it is exalted by the movement as a premier spiritual prize.

Clearly, that emphasis on tongues contrasts with the patristic de-emphasis. Whereas the writings of the early fathers seldom mention the gift, contemporary Pentecostal writings constantly highlight it. “The question which Pentecostals have difficulty answering when they stress the significance of glossolalia is: If glossolalia is so significant, why has its history been so spotty, almost nonexistent from the apostolic age to about 1650?”⁴⁹ Or, why has a gift that is mentioned only occasionally and tangentially by the church fathers become one of the foundational pillars for Pentecostal practice?

⁴⁵Although proponents trace their origin back to the primitive church, the American Pentecostal movement in its contemporary form began on January 1, 1901 when Agnes Ozman, a student of C. P. Parham, reportedly spoke in the Chinese language. It is significant that the first Pentecostals believed their tongues-speech was authentic foreign human language (Gerhard Hasel, *Speaking in Tongues* [Berrien Springs, Mich.: Adventist Theological Society, 1991] 11-12).

⁴⁶Prudencio Damboriena, *Tongues as of Fire* (Cleveland, Ohio: Corpus, 1969) 101. See also Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen, N.J.: Hendrickson, 2000) 15. C. G. Williams (“Speaking in Tongues,” in *Strange Gifts?*, eds. David Martin and Peter Mullen [New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984] 72) says that tongues-speaking is “central” to Pentecostal worship. Watson E. Mills concurs: “The charismatic phenomena of xenolalia and glossolalia, in the history of the Christian church, have been singled out by some groups as essential marks of the faith” (“Glossolalia: An Introduction,” in *Speaking in Tongues* 3).

⁴⁷Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988) 9.

⁴⁸James W. Jones, *Filled with New Wine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974) 86.

⁴⁹E. Glenn Hinson, “The Significance of Glossolalia in the History of Christianity,” in *Speaking in Tongues* 182.

Regarding the Nature of Tongues-Speaking.

According to Pentecostals, the gift of tongues does not necessarily involve an actual human language. Though they claim that the tongues they speak are indeed true languages, they are not always *human* languages. But are their assertions verifiable?

Classical Pentecostals would insist that tongues are a true language and most neo-Pentecostals, Protestant and Catholic, usually agree. All Pentecostal literature, classical, Protestant and Catholic neo-Pentecostal, give examples of foreign languages which were spoken in the presence of someone competent in the language who verified the linguistic authenticity of what was spoken. However, when one accepts the Pentecostal presuppositions, namely that the language can be any language ever spoken, even languages no longer spoken, or even the language of the Angels (they cite 1 Cor. 13:1), the problems of scientific verification become staggering. Also the kind of controlled situation necessary for a truly scientific study rarely obtains when a language is recognized in a Pentecostal meeting. Without this kind of controlled situation most scientists would not accept tongues as true languages, and would rather contend that the recognition of the language by someone linguistically competent is based on psychology rather than linguistic factors.⁵⁰

Criswell cites further evidence against the Pentecostal claims.

As far as I have been able to learn, no real language is ever spoken by the glossolaliast. He truly speaks in an unknown and unknowable tongue. Tape recordings of those speaking in unknown tongues were played before the Toronto Institute of Linguistics. After these learned men in the science of phonetics had studied the recordings, they said, "This is no human language."⁵¹

Even when two or more different Pentecostal interpreters listen to the same audio recording of a tongues-speaker, their interpretations are totally different—suggesting that the tongues themselves are not real languages that are capable of being translated.⁵² Damboriena agrees, saying, "The 'languages' I have heard consist in completely unintelligible bubblings of sound and words which not even the Pentecostals around me (and some of them had already been blessed with the gift) were able to grasp."⁵³

Proponents of Pentecostalism admit that their version of tongues-speaking sounds like little more than incomprehensible muttering. Christenson acknowledges that when speaking in tongues "you do not understand what you are saying. . . . But it is a praying with the spirit rather than the mind."⁵⁴ Jones adds,

For some (particularly academic types like myself) it is a matter of understanding. They

⁵⁰Kilian McDonnell, "The Theology of Speaking in Tongues," in *The Holy Spirit in Today's Church* 93-95.

⁵¹W. A. Criswell, "Facts Concerning Modern Glossolalia," in *The Holy Spirit in Today's Church*, 92. See also M. Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia* (Hants, England: Ashgate, 2002) 2.

⁵²John P. Kildahl, "Six Behavioral Observations about Speaking in Tongues," in *Gifts of the Spirit and the Body of Christ*, ed. Elmo J. Agrimoson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) 77.

⁵³Damboriena, *Tongues* 105.

⁵⁴Larry Christenson, "Bypassing the Mind," in *The Holy Spirit in Today's Church* 87.

do not like things they cannot comprehend. Mystery frightens them. Since speaking in tongues appears so irrational, they will not involve themselves in something they are unable to figure out. . . . Because to speak in tongues seems so foolish, our fear of it forces us to examine how much our pride keeps us from surrendering totally to God.⁵⁵

Thus Jones contends that the audible sound of unintelligible gibberish is actually a good thing, forcing Christians to humble themselves in their dependence on God.

Again, this Pentecostal proposition is in direct contrast to the views of the church fathers. Patristic evidence indicates that the fathers believed tongues to be actual languages. Thus, the ability to speak in tongues was the ability to speak in authentic foreign languages—all of which could be accurately translated. While on occasion this is the Pentecostal claim, it is certainly not the overarching thrust of their contemporary teaching or practice. As Hunter, in his study of the church fathers, aptly concludes:

Many present-day Pentecostals have more or less assumed that the historical precedents of tongues-speech were usually glossolalic [unintelligible speech]. This study, however, has found that when the Fathers clarified the nature of the tongues-speech being practiced they most usually specified them as being xenolalic [foreign human languages].⁵⁶

Not only do Pentecostals expand their definition of tongues to include unintelligible speech, they also see such ecstatic speech as both normative and orthodox—desiring that the mind be bypassed as much as possible.⁵⁷ Thus, they promote a type of spiritual ecstasy, in which self-control and personal inhibition are removed. Yet, this ecstatic lack of control was exactly what the early fathers condemned.⁵⁸

William Samarin, a linguistic professor at the University of Toronto, attended numerous Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal meetings in several countries over a five-year period. At the end of his time, he concluded,

When the full apparatus of linguistic science comes to bear on glossolalia, this turns out to be only a façade language—although at times a very good one indeed. For when we comprehend what language is, we must conclude that no glossa, no matter how well constructed, is a specimen of human language, because it is neither internally organized nor systematically related to the world man perceives. . . . Glossolalia is indeed a language in some ways, but this is only because the speaker (unconsciously) wants it to be like language. Yet in spite of superficial similarities, glossolalia is fundamentally *not*

⁵⁵Jones, *Filled with New Wine* 86.

⁵⁶Hunter, “Tongues-Speech: A Patristic Analysis” 135. See also Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit* 378.

⁵⁷Damboriena (*Tongues* 111) records the experiences of Pentecostal leaders who espouse the out-of-control ecstasy that accompanies tongues-speech.

⁵⁸Severian of Gabala, *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church*, cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS 144 in reference to 1 Cor 14:28. Along these lines, the fact that unintelligible tongues-speech is not the sole property of Pentecostalism is noteworthy. Dayton (*Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* 15–16) notes, “In America, for example, glossolalia has appeared in such groups as the Shakers and Mormons of the nineteenth century.” Robert G. Gromacki (*The Modern Tongues Movement* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964] 5–10) observes that frenzied speech (glossolalia) occurred among the ancient Greek and early Phoenecian religions, the Greco-Roman mystery religions, Islam, Eskimo paganism, and paganism in Tibet and China. Hasel (*Speaking in Tongues* 14, 18) also includes “shamans” and “witch doctors” in the list of pagan tongue-speakers.

language.⁵⁹

The Pentecostal response—that glossolalia should not be analyzed like a normal language because it is “spiritual” and not “rational”⁶⁰—only reinforces the point that Pentecostal tongues does not consist of authentic foreign languages. Clearly this does not match up with the true gift as described by the fathers.

Regarding the Extent of Tongues-Speaking

Pentecostals teach that all Christians, as they progress in their spiritual lives, should come to the place where they can speak in tongues. After all, the gift of tongues is connected to Spirit-baptism and Spirit-baptism, as a post-conversion experience, is something every Pentecostal Christian is encouraged to seek. Thus, the believer who never speaks in tongues is missing out on a vital part of the full Christian experience.

With this in mind, Duffield and Van Cleave argue that “Prayer in tongues is normal for the Spirit-filled Christian.”⁶¹ In fact, “Pentecostals have often tested the faithfulness of their followers, as individuals or corporations, by their stand on the theology and practice of glossolalia.”⁶² Along these lines, the two Menzies say, “I believe Paul encourages us to see the private manifestation of tongues as edifying and available to every believer.”⁶³ Basham even goes so far as to indicate that “something is missing” in the lives of those who have never experienced the gift.⁶⁴

Rick Walston, a Pentecostal, argues that Pentecostals see a difference between the public use of tongues (which he calls “the gift of tongues”) and the private use of tongues (which he calls “devotional tongues” or “prayer language”).⁶⁵ He contends that, while not every Christian should experience public tongues-speaking, every Christian *should* experience devotional tongues. In this way, he attempts to reconcile Pentecostal practice with Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12–14.⁶⁶

⁵⁹William J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels* (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 127-28, 227. Also see Felicita D. Goodman, “Glossolalia,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 5:564.

⁶⁰J. R. Williams (“Charismatic Movement,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984] 207) says: “Charismatics are not disturbed by linguists who claim that glossolalia has no observable language structure, for if such were the case, speaking in tongues would not be spiritual but rational speech.”

⁶¹Guy P. Duffield and N. M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1987) 341.

⁶²Damboriena, *Tongues* 102.

⁶³Robert P. Menzies and William W. Menzies, *Spirit and Power* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 142.

⁶⁴Basham, “The Value of Speaking in Tongues” 79.

⁶⁵Walston, *Tongues Controversy* 21-23. Donald Lee Bamett and Jeffrey P. McGregor, *Speaking in Other Tongues* (Seattle: Community Chapel, 1986) 326-27, argue for four aspects of tongues-speaking and draw a major distinction between private tongues and public tongues. See also J. Morris Ashcraft, “Glossolalia in the First Epistle to the Corinthians” in *Tongues*, ed. Luther B. Dyer (Jefferson City, Mo.: Le Roi, 1971) 75-76.

⁶⁶Ibid. Lewis J. Willis (“Glossolalia in Perspective,” in *The Glossolalia Phenomenon*, ed. Wade H. Horton [Cleveland, Tenn.: Pathway, 1966] 271) argues similarly. It should also be noted that this understanding has been contested, on exegetical grounds, by scholars such as Anthony A. Hoekema, *Tongues and Spirit Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 85-96. Hoekema views Paul’s words as a

By contrast, however, the church fathers never draw this distinction between devotional tongues and public tongues. Though they concede that at times the gift is exercised privately (as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 14), they tend to view this private use negatively.⁶⁷ More important, they indicate that private use is still the same gift of tongues (as mentioned in Isa 28:1, Acts 2:4-13, and 1 Cor 12:30)⁶⁸—it is simply not interpreted for others.

Take, for example, Chrysostom's comments on 1 Corinthians 14:14-15 (the main passage Pentecostals use to defend devotional tongues):

Ask accordingly not to have the gift of tongues only, but also of interpretation, that thou mayest become useful unto all, and not shut up thy gift in thyself alone. "For if I pray in a tongue," saith he, "my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful." Seest thou how by degrees bringing his argument to a point, he signifies that not to others only is such an one useless, but also to himself; if at least "his understanding is unfruitful?" For if a man should speak only in the Persian, or any other foreign tongue, and not understand what he saith, then of course to himself also will he be thenceforth a barbarian, not to another only, from not knowing the meaning of the sound. For there were of old many who had also a gift of prayer, together with a tongue; and they prayed, and the tongue spake, praying either in the Persian or Latin language, but their understanding knew not what was spoken. Wherefore also he said, "I'll pray in a tongue, my spirit prayeth," i.e., the gift which is given me and which moves my tongue, "but my understanding is unfruitful."

What then may that be which is best in itself, and doth good? And how ought one to act, or what request of God? To pray, "both with the spirit," i.e., the gift, and "with the understanding." Wherefore also he said, "I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also." He signifieth the same thing here also, that both the tongue may speak, and the understanding may not be ignorant of the things spoken.⁶⁹

Notice that Chrysostom defines this "private prayer language" as authentic foreign languages—the same way he defines the "public" gift of tongues elsewhere. Moreover, he insists that even this "devotional" tongues-speech should be understood by the speaker (so that he can be edified) and also interpreted (so that others can be edified).⁷⁰ Clearly, he sees no categorical distinction between private use and public use. Thus, when the fathers indicate that the gift of tongues is not

corrective to Corinthian misuse and abuse, and not as biblical support for an altogether different type of tongues experience.

⁶⁷See Hasel, *Speaking in Tongues* 150. The reason for this negative reaction is that they believed the ideal use of tongues was other-oriented.

⁶⁸R. P. Spittler ("Glossolalia," in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002] 673) notes that classical Pentecostals admittedly support this distinction by reading their interpretation of Acts into 1 Corinthians. The fact that the fathers equated the gift in Acts with the gift in 1 Corinthians demonstrates that their interpretation necessitated no such division.

⁶⁹Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians* 35.5-6, cited from Schaff, *NPNF*, First Series 12:211 in reference to 1 Cor 14:13-15.

⁷⁰Ambrosiaster, commenting on 1 Corinthians 14:14, also views tongues-speech as a negative if it is not understood by the speaker. He says: "What can a person achieve if he does not know what he is saying?" (*Commentary on Paul's Epistles*, cited from *1-2 Corinthians*, ACCS 141). This contrasts with the Pentecostal description of devotional tongues, in which understanding and interpretation is unnecessary. Like Chrysostom, Ambrosiaster nowhere indicates he believed in two distinct kinds of tongues-speaking (i.e., private and public).

received by every believer, they mean this in the broadest sense—whether publicly or privately. Not every Christian is expected to speak in tongues.

Furthermore, if devotional tongues-speech was a universal part of the early church's experience, one would expect the church fathers to emphasize it (or at least mention it). Yet, the patristic evidence not only de-emphasizes private tongues-speech, but instead strongly stresses the other-oriented nature of the gift.

A survey of early Christian literature indicates that the church fathers believe in only one gift of tongues, giving no indication to the contrary. Furthermore, they teach that this solitary gift was given to only a select number of Christians—as the Holy Spirit desired. They do not teach that tongues-speaking (either private or public) was the normal experience of every Christian.⁷¹

Regarding the Acquisition of Tongues-Speaking.

Although Pentecostals claim that the tongues phenomenon practiced in their churches is a supernaturally imparted gift from God to willing believers, evidence suggests otherwise. Tongues-speaking is often faked, manipulated, or self-induced—the result being a human imitation rather than the genuine gift. As Weaver puts it, “The present day phenomenon of Christians claiming to speak in tongues has some other explanation than that it is a continuation of the New Testament practice of the gift.”⁷² Kildahl explains how this manufactured process works.

There are five steps in the process of inducing someone to speak in tongues. . . . From a psychological point of view, the first step seems to involve some kind of magnetic relationship between the leader and the one who is about to attempt to speak in tongues. Second, the initiate generally has a sense of personal distress—usually involving a profound life crisis. Third, the initiate has been taught a rationale for understanding what tongues-speaking is. Fourth, the presence of a supporting group of fellow believers enhances the possibility of eventually speaking in tongues. Fifth, somewhere in the process there is an intense emotional atmosphere.⁷³

In other words, tongues may be more closely linked to peer pressure and self-expectation than Spirit-endowment and a true gift of grace. After all, the Pentecostal leadership expects each member to speak in tongues; the congregation expects each member to speak in tongues; and the members themselves expect to speak in tongues.

In light of this, some Pentecostal churches actually offer training for those who wish to speak in tongues.⁷⁴ And Pentecostal authors Charles and Frances Hunter give this encouragement to their readers:

You may start off with a little baby language, but just keep on. Remember when your children were small they started out with a very small vocabulary, and then as they added new letters to it, they were capable of making more words. The same thing is sometimes true of your Spirit language. The Spirit can only give back to you what you give to him, so put those extra sounds of the alphabet in and see what he does with them! Don't keep

⁷¹It should be noted that not all charismatics teach that every Christian should speak in tongues. For example, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 1076.

⁷²Gilbert B. Weaver, “Tongues Shall Cease,” *GJ* 14/1 (Winter 1973):23.

⁷³Kildahl, “Six Behavioral Observations about Speaking in Tongues” 74.

⁷⁴John P. Kildahl, *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) 2-5.

on speaking a baby language, but allow the Holy Spirit to develop a full language in and through you.⁷⁵

That is a way of saying the gift of tongues requires time and practice to perfect—something far different than the full-fledged ability to speak foreign languages without any training or practice.

Studies have shown that people can be trained to imitate the Pentecostal version of tongues without detection.⁷⁶ And, maybe most significantly, “There are numerous former members of the Pentecostal movement who retain the ability to speak in tongues, even though they have no belief that their speech is a gift of God.”⁷⁷ As Poythress summarizes:

A significant body of professional linguistic, psychological, and sociological analysis of modern tongues-speaking (glossolalia) has now accumulated. Some of it attributes a generally positive value to speaking in tongues; some of it is quite negative. All of it agrees in treating glossolalia as at root a nonmiraculous phenomenon.⁷⁸

In light of this, linguistic experts agree that glossolalia “is, actually, a learned behavior, learned either unwarily or, sometimes, consciously”⁷⁹ and “the tongue speaker is the product of considerable instruction.”⁸⁰

This evidence is again incompatible with that of the early church fathers. The fathers saw tongues as verifiably linked to a special endowment of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals, on the other hand, struggle to deny accusations attacking both the legitimacy of this gift and the actual source behind them. In light of the facts, it seems reasonable to agree with Kildahl when he says, “In summary, my glossolalia research has included an examination of the phenomenon itself, and a study of the theories about it. I have concluded that it is a learned behavior which often brings a sense of power and well-being.”⁸¹ Edgar furthers this evaluation: “However, mere glossolalia is common and can be self-induced. They are not a manifestation of a miracle from God. As long as the New Testament gift of tongues is equated with mere ecstatic unintelligible utterance (glossolalia), it can be explained apart from the miraculous.”⁸²

Regarding the Purpose of Tongues-Speaking

Pentecostals divide the gift of tongues into its public use and its private

⁷⁵Charles and Frances Hunter, *Why Should "I" Speak in Tongues???* (Houston: Hunter Ministries, 1976) 188.

⁷⁶Kildahl, “Behavioral Observations” 76. False religions, such as the Hindus, also employ a form of glossolalia nearly identical to the Pentecostal type.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Vern S. Poythress, “Linguistic and Sociological Analyses of Modern Tongues-speaking: Their Contributions and Limitations,” *WTJ* 42/2 (Spring 1980):367.

⁷⁹Felicitas D. Goodman, “Glossolalia,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 5:563-64.

⁸⁰Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels* 74.

⁸¹Kildahl, “Behavior Observations” 78. Spittler (“Glossolalia” 675) notes, “Glossolalia of simply human origin is probably more frequent than recognized. That explains, for example, the humanities scholar who ‘taught himself’ to speak in tongues and can do so at will.”

⁸²Edgar, *Satisfied* 154-55.

use. In so doing, they contend that the public use of tongues is for congregational edification, while the private use of tongues is for self-edification. In their estimation, this self-edification is a primary purpose of private glossalia. As one Pentecostal work explains: "Every Spirit-filled Christian can and should pray frequently in tongues for self-edification (1 Cor. 14:2, 4, 5, 18), building himself up by praying in the Holy Ghost."⁸³ Commenting on 1 Corinthians 14, James Slay remarks,

This chapter attests to the truth that the glossolalia phenomenon can and does benefit the individual. Tongues and the interpretation of tongues are gifts placed in the church by the will of God and through the Spirit. This endowment is a vital part of the charismata, and as it blesses the individual, quite naturally it will have a salutary effect upon the church since the church is composed of individuals.⁸⁴

According to Spittler, "the significance of glossolalia for the individual speaker may lie in its capacity to vent the inexpressible—hence the observed connection with stress."⁸⁵ Wayne E. Ward echoes this same description:

Perhaps the most persistent positive claim for the experience of tongue speaking is that it provides a continuing source of spiritual power and joy in the Christian life. Almost all who have had the experience say that it enriches their prayer life in such a way that it seems they have never prayed before. Many describe an abounding joy which floods their lives, and many others demonstrate a new vitality which is the strongest argument for the tongues experience.⁸⁶

Self-edification, personal renewal, and private religious experience are listed as primary purposes and results of the gift.

The church fathers, on the other hand, do not make any division between public and private tongues. Thus, though the church fathers generally recognize that the use of any gift (including tongues) includes some personal benefit, they are also quick to clarify that personal edification is never the main purpose of the gifts. Instead, the ideal use of tongues-speech in any context includes its interpretation for the good of the community. The idea that tongues-speech is primarily intended as stress relief, or even personal spiritual renewal, is a concept that is absent from early Christian literature.

Regarding the Interpretation of Tongues-Speaking

In maintaining the division between public and private tongues, Pentecostals claim that only public tongues require interpretation.⁸⁷ Furthermore, they contend that this interpretation does not necessarily mean a strict translation. Thus the question is raised:

⁸³Donald Lee Barnett and Jeffrey P. McGregor, *Speaking in Other Tongues* (Seattle: Community Chapel, 1986) 327.

⁸⁴James L. Slay, "Glossolalia: Its Value to the Individual," in *The Glossolalia Phenomenon* 240.

⁸⁵Spittler, "Glossolalia" 675. Ernest Best agrees, noting that the practice "certainly brings joy and release from tension to some Christians" ("The Interpretation of Tongues," in *Speaking in Tongues* 310).

⁸⁶Wayne E. Ward, "Various Views of Tongue Speaking," in *Tongues* 21.

⁸⁷Barnett and McGregor, *Other Tongues* 326.

Is the gift of “interpretation of tongues” a gift of the ability to translate into the common language of the hearers what is being uttered by one who is “speaking in tongues?” Or does “interpretation” here mean, rather, exegesis or explanation? For instance, what is “spoken in a tongue” might be enigmatic or oracular: the words might be intelligible but the meaning is obscure; the gift of interpretation would then be the gift of the ability to make plain the meaning of what was being uttered. Or, to consider a third possibility, does “interpretation” mean here what an art critic does when he reports on the message or meaning of a piece of music? In this case the interpreter would neither translate nor convey in plain language the gist of an enigmatic message; he would, rather, explain the aim and the mood (praise, lament, thanksgiving, exultation) of the utterance.⁸⁸

In response to criticism, one Pentecostal writer contends, “An interpretation is not always a translation or a rendering from one language to another in equivalent words or grammatical terms. An interpretation is a declaration of the meaning and may be very differently stated from the precise form of the original.”⁸⁹

On the basis of this answer, Pentecostal interpretations can have a wide variety of meaning—even when interpreting the same tongues-message. Kildahl, for example, had several Pentecostal interpreters listen to a single audio recording of glossolalia. After his experiment, he noted,

In no instances was there any similarity in the several interpretations. The following typifies our results: one interpreter said the tongue-speaker was praying for the health of his children; another that the same tongues-speech was an expression of gratitude to God for a recently successful church fund-raising effort.⁹⁰

But, when he confronted the interpreters with the inconsistencies, he was told that “God gave to one person one interpretation and to another person another interpretation.”⁹¹

While this explanation is certainly convenient, it does make them vulnerable to the accusation that, generally speaking, Pentecostal glossolalia does not consist of authentic languages⁹² and therefore cannot be translated with any degree of consistency or certainty. Even when exercising private tongues, Pentecostals admit that the speaker does not understand what he is praying: “Many of you will be hearing little sounds right now running through your mind. Strange little parts of words. Strange little syllables. You don’t understand them, but listen for them, because this is the beginning of your Spirit language. Some of you may not hear anything, but will just begin to speak in a moment.”⁹³ Even so, they contend that believers can be edified: “This writer feels that glossolalia, even if it be an uninterpreted outburst of ecstatic praise, would not only edify the speaker but might possibly convict the earnest spectator.”⁹⁴

In contrast, the church fathers continually emphasized the importance of interpretation whenever tongue-speaking is used. In their thinking, tongues-speech

⁸⁸Stuart D. Currie, “Speaking in Tongues” 84.

⁸⁹Slay, “Glossolalia,” 239.

⁹⁰Kildahl, *Psychology* 63.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²See Samaritan, *Tongues of Men and Angels* 1-2, 73.

⁹³Charles and Frances Hunter, *Why Should “I” Speak in Tongues???* 185.

⁹⁴Slay, “Glossolalia” 239.

profits no one if it cannot be understood. Furthermore, their emphasis on tongues-speech as consisting of rational foreign language indicates that they understood interpretation to consist primarily of translation (and possibly explanation). If rational languages are presupposed (for tongues-speech), no reason exists to redefine *interpretation* as anything else.

A Pentecostal Definition of Tongues

Having established the propositions above, an honest Pentecostal description of tongues (at least in its practical outworking) might be stated as follows: *The gift of tongues includes the ability to speak in a spiritual language (which has no definable relationship to any authentic rational language) either for the church or for personal edification. If intended for the church, tongues are interpreted by those with the gift of interpretation (with various meanings derived from the same message). If intended for personal edification, the message is not interpreted at all. On the whole, tongues-speaking is often a self-induced phenomenon, available to all who are willing to learn it.*⁹⁵ Though some Pentecostal leaders may not endorse this description verbatim, it accurately reflects their writings and parallels the history and practice of tongues-speech in their ecclesiastical circles.

Conclusion

Based on the preceding study, it follows that the church fathers disagree with contemporary Pentecostals on several fundamental aspects as to the essence and practice of tongues-speaking. While Pentecostal adherents are forced to divide tongues-speaking into two categories—private and public—the church fathers see no such division. Instead, the patristic writings suggest a solitary gift of tongues that consisted of the supernatural ability to speak previously unknown foreign languages for the purpose of evangelism and edification. On this basis it is safe to conclude that the Pentecostal phenomena prevalent over the past century is not the same as that of the early church. Instead it is of recent origin in the history of Christianity. As Hasel explains,

The contemporary phenomenon of “speaking in tongues,” which is practiced by millions of Christians around the world at present, is of recent origin in Christianity. Even though there have been attempts by the score to demonstrate that the phenomenon of glossolalia in modern times has roots going back for centuries in Christian practice, it remains certain that it is of recent origin.⁹⁶

⁹⁵Basham (“The Value of Speaking in Tongues” 82-83) notes that the private use of tongues is by far the most common in Pentecostal circles. This ability is not only given to Christians but can also be seen in pagan rituals and practices.

⁹⁶Hasel, *Speaking in Tongues* 17.