A Symposium on the Tongues Movement Part II:

Church History and the Tongues Movement

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Advocates of the tongues movement rely upon two sources for their arguments. First of all, there is an appeal to instances of speaking in tongues in the New Testament and, secondly, late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century instances on a widespread scale are given large place in arguing for the present-day resurgence of this apostolic gift. However, it is rather remarkable that very few, if any, of the writers of this movement refer to the grand stream of church history from apostolic times until our present day for proof of God's plan to perpetuate this unusual occurrence and to use it in the entirety of gospel outreach. The silence for many centuries ought to sober many of the more vocal exponents of this new movement, but it seems that a new doctrine has clamped itself upon the imagination, if not the mentalities, of these exponents. Simply stated, this new doctrine is that we are now in the last days and therefore we should see again a special reoccurrence of those things of apostolic days; gifts, privileges, blessings, and "the power" which have been noticeably lacking in church life for these long centuries. If this doctrine be true, then God has kept from His people for these two millennia the full extent of the workings of His grace, and the constant gifts of the Holy Spirit (if these are within His will), resulting in a terribly impoverished church to carry out His grand design in this world. Again, this doctrine heightens the importance of the days in which we live and also lends some plausible credence to the centrality of the tongues movement if it can be proved that this was central in apostolic days.

Some thirty-five years ago a distinguished American educator, Dr. George B. Cutten of Colgate University, took a close look at any historical instances of this speaking in tongues. After thorough research, it was Cutten's conclusion that in the ancient church at least, the church of the fathers, there was not one well-attested instance of any person who exercised speaking in tongues or even pretended to exercise it. Here it possibly should be added that in the second century Irenaeus wrote that he had heard that there were some who spoke in all sorts of languages.

It is worth noting that his contemporary, Justin Martyr, also "heard" of prophetic gifts, but he does not specifically mention tongues. Another group of that same period was the Montanists who are often alleged to have engaged in it, but actually their sin, if so it was, was that of enthusiasm, ecstasy, and in some cases emotional forecasts of prophetic type. Another group was the Marcionites. Against them Tertullian alleged that there may have been some instances of tongues. Origen in the next century claimed that there were some prophets in his day who spoke in tongues and yet the particulars which he enunciated would indicate prophetic utterances rather than the use of other languages. Again, in his case as in several, it is not clear whether these prophets were within the orbit of Christian activity or prophets of other religious groups. It was Chrysostom of the fourth century who attested to the fact that speaking in languages had stopped altogether even among fringe groups where suspicion had held that they occurred.

The Middle Ages constituted a long millennium of darkness and yet the light shone largely through those of the line of descent or the trail of testimony. But here we are dealing with so much that is superstitious, mystical, inexplainable, awesome, weird, and monastic that one must be extremely careful in ferreting out instances of deep-rooted New Testament spirituality, and especially would that be true in the case of gifts. Gorres has listed some hermits by name who had a use of another language such as Clarenus in 1300, St. Dominick, St. Vincent Ferrier (b. 1347), and even Francis Xavier (b.1506), the last

claiming to have ability to speak to people of India. The latter instance is rather interesting because it was officially sanctioned by Pope Urban VIII who had time in which to lend ecclesiastical auspices to such a nebulous event while all the time overlooking the horrors and wickedness of the Inquisition. Here a statement by the venerable B. B. Warfield is helpful for it was his scholarly conclusion that “pretension to possession and use of miraculous powers in a permanent endowment are a specialty of Roman Catholicism.”

The Reformation era was marked by a tremendous outburst of vitality in grasping again the great, Scriptural doctrines of sin, justification, the inspiration of the Word, and the true nature of the church. Among those who have been classified as radicals of the Reformation there are some hints of the ecstatic and the uncontrollable. Some few among the Anabaptists have been charged with this as in the case of the Munsterites, as well as some of the hounded and hated Albigenses of Lanquedoc. In every such case as this, however, one must reject these charges because all of them are based upon the bitter hatred and intense dislike of these groups by their enemies. Among the persecuted of the Reformation period there were many who reacted violently not only to the Roman Church but the arrogance and intolerance of main Protestant groups, and in a time of great emotional stir and hysteria did and said things which are not to be counted as in the mainstream of the group to which they professed they belonged. Actually, speaking in tongues played no part in the Reformation movement. This should give us cause to pause and reflect. Thousands of earnest Christians all over Europe sought to re-establish earnestly and completely New Testament doctrine and holy living. Scriptures were searched diligently by some of the finest minds that the church has known. Excellent treatises were produced, outstanding credal statements were formulated, and men set themselves to discover again the full-orbed teaching of the New Testament. Not one of these even intimated that the doctrine of speaking in tongues had a part in the continuing stream of God’s work or in the present-day activity in which the Holy Spirit directs.

In the history of the church of modern times in lands outside our own nation there have been a few scattered instances when this matter of speaking in tongues flared into open profession. In the last few years of the eighteenth century the “little prophets” of Cevennes in France arose in which children three years old and up preached, it is alleged, in correct French. Their experiences were accompanied by faintings and swoonings at which times they seemed to be insensible to pain and others were unable to stop them from their strange preaching. The most commonly known occurrence seems to be that of Edward Irving who was a London pastor in the third decade of the nineteenth century. A very able and successful preacher, Irving made a public declaration of healing and tongues in 1832, allowing them as being in order at regular services of his London church. Prophecies also occurred and Irving’s views on these matters were easily discernible in his collected writings. It was Carlyle’s eye-witness report that his views were accepted by the “fanatical.” In another letter the essayist added that evidently “God was working miracles by hysterics.” The London Times sent reporters to watch the services and to look out for “ravings, screamings, bawlings.” Of course, Irving was ousted for his part in this by the Presbyterian Church but this did not stop him from starting another, namely, the Catholic Apostolic Church.

Speaking in tongues is indeed a new thing in American Christianity. The historically informed will not need it to be repeated that in the founding days of our country our Pilgrim fathers, Puritan leaders, Baptist preachers, Presbyterian divines, and Methodist laymen did not at all indulge in this practice. They indeed did have times of great emotional conviction and were moved to show their convictions through their fervency and feelings. However, they did not feel led of the Spirit of God to demonstrate this through miracles, healing, gifts, speaking in tongues, or in interpretation of tongues. Even in the strenuous days of the Great Awakening and the days of spiritual heat of the frontier revivals these things did not occur. Thousands were greatly moved, convicted of their sin and sins but they found no expression of relief from these in such as is claimed by Pentecostals

today.

Actually, Pentecostalism began in the nineteenth century. Two groups must be given credit here for the early occurrences, namely the Mormons of Joseph Smith and the Shakers. It will be remembered by the students of Mormonism that Joseph Smith believed in the gift of tongues along with visions, revelations, etc. To him tongues would accompany the reception of the Holy Spirit and would open the door for visionary understandings and revelations. After all, this is the way the Book of Mormon had come to him. Other historians of this movement, such as J. H. Kennedy and J. W. Gunnison, relate the unbelievable and weird episodes when this gift was claimed to have been enjoyed with the interpretations that followed. At the very best, one can only look upon this as the unbiblical braying of wide-eyed and hot-minded men. Something similar took place among the Shakers, especially with its founder, "Mother" Ann Lee who claimed that she could discourse in seventy-two languages. The gift of tongues was also accompanied by times of unspeakable joy and dancing during which many of the hymns of this movement were composed, although made up of unintelligible and unheard of words.

Pentecostalism itself cannot be dated much earlier than 1900. Some did live before that time who claimed "Pentecostal Holiness," and "Pentecostal Fullness," while others engaged in "Tarrying and Speaking" meetings. However, very few of these things occurred before 1900. A Rev. David Awrey of Delaware, Ohio, claimed he had the Spirit of fullness in 1890. In 1897 a Holiness convention was held in New England composed of "gift people." In the year 1900 Charles F. Parham opened the Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas, and this school held that the signs of tongues and healing should be normal for the church. Then W. J. Seymour became greatly enamored with the message of Pentecost and started the Azusa Street Assembly in Los Angeles in 1906. This may be as good a date as any for the birthday of the modern Pentecostal movement. One of the members of this group, G. B. Cashwell, left Los Angeles and went to North Carolina, and in 1908 preached at the annual meeting of the Church of God in

Cleveland, Tennessee, where the leader, A. J. Tomlinson, got the baptism and the Church of God became Pentecostal. Even the Christian and Missionary Alliance could not escape the influence of it and in 1907 some tongues appeared on the campus at Nyack, but A. B. Simpson refused to commit himself to say that tongues were necessary. However, his hymns have been used by Pentecostals since. The Assemblies of God have always noted their indebtedness to A. B. Simpson. The first General Council of the Assemblies of God was held in 1914 in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and from this has come the largest group of Pentecostals in this country, the Assemblies of God, which currently claim over one half a million members out of a total of approximately a million Pentecostalists in the entire nation.

It is interesting that histories of tongues movements and Pentecostal groups do not go back much before 1875. Therefore, it is admitted by all that this is an extremely modern movement. It has not been, it is not, nor can it be based on church history and a stream of witness to tongues down through the centuries. Indeed, from a few instances of it in New Testament times there has not been an occurrence of it since, unless allowance is made for the rather spotty and questionable practices among some medieval mystics. The voice of church history, when read in its total ramifications, would indicate that God has been guiding His people and that He has been teaching them His Word down through the centuries. The voice of history also is that God has majored on those things which are given priority in His own Word and not on those things which men claim by experiences, however hectic or calm. The voice of church history, therefore, is against the modern tongues movement and would stigmatize it as being an unscriptural and unhistorical phenomenon arising out of the experiences, tempers, moods, tensions, upheavals, upsettings, fears, frustrations, longings, desires, and emotional impulses so common in the last century.

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