The Nature of Tongues

Charles Hodge

(from his Commentary on First Corinthian - 12:10)

"*To another divers kinds of tongues.*" That is, the ability to speak in languages previously unknown to the speakers. The nature of this gift is determined by the account given in Acts 2:4-11, where it is said, the apostles spoke "with *other* tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance;" and people of all the neighboring nations asked with astonishment, "Are not all these that speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue wherein we were born?" It is impossible to deny that the miracle recorded in Acts consisted in enabling the apostles to speak in languages which they had never learnt. Unless, therefore, it be assumed that the gift of which Paul here speaks was something of an entirely different nature, its character is put beyond dispute. The identity of the two, however, is proved from the sameness of the terms by which they are described. In Mark 16:17, it was promised that the disciples should speak "with new tongues." In Acts 2:4, it is said they spoke "with *other* tongues." In Acts 10:46, and 19:6, it is said of those on whom the Holy Ghost came, that "they spake with tongues." It can hardly be doubted that all these forms of expression are to be understood in the same sense; that to speak "with tongues" in Acts 10:46, means the same thing as speaking "with other tongues," in Acts 2:4, and that this again means the same as speaking "with new tongues," as promised in Mark 16:17. If the meaning of the phrase is thus historically and philologically determined for Acts and Mark, it must also be determined for the Epistle to the Corinthians. If *tongues* means languages in the former, it must have the

same meaning in the latter. We have thus two arguments in favor of the old interpretation of this passage. First, that the facts narrated in Acts necessitate the interpretation of the phrase “to speak with other tongues” to mean to speak with foreign languages. Second, that the interchange of the expressions, *new* tongues, *other* tongues, and *tongues*, in reference to the same event, shows that the last mentioned (to speak with tongues) must have the same sense with the two former expressions, which can only mean to speak in new languages. A third argument is, that the common interpretation satisfies all the facts of the case. Those facts are,

1. That what was spoken with tongues was intelligible to those who understood foreign languages, as appears from Acts 2:11. Therefore the speaking was not an incoherent, unintelligible rhapsody.
2. What was uttered were articulate sounds, the vehicle of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, 1 Corinthians 14:14-17.
3. They were edifying, and therefore intelligible to him who uttered them, 1 Corinthians 14:4, 16.
4. They admitted of being interpreted, which supposes them to be intelligible.
5. Though intelligible in themselves, and to the speaker, they were unintelligible to others, that is, to those not acquainted with the language used; and consequently unsuited for an ordinary Christian assembly. The folly which Paul rebuked was, speaking in Arabic to men who understood only Greek. The speaker might understand what he said, but others were not profited, 1 Corinthians 14:2, 19.
6. The illustration employed in 1 Corinthians 14:7, 11, from musical instruments, and from the case of foreigners, requires the common interpretation. Paul admits that the sounds uttered were “not without signification,” v. 10. His complaint is, that a man who speaks in an unknown

tongue is to him a foreigner, v. 11. This illustration supposes the sounds uttered to be intelligible in themselves, but not understood by those to whom they were addressed.

7. The common interpretation is suited even to those passages which present the only real difficulty in the case; viz., those in which the apostle speaks of the understanding as being unfruitful in the exercise of the gift of tongues, and those in which he contrasts praying with the spirit and praying with the understanding, 14:14, 15. Although these passages, taken by themselves, might seem to indicate that the speaker himself did not understand what he said, and even that his intellect was in abeyance, yet they may naturally mean only that the understanding of the speaker was unprofitable to others; and speaking with the understanding may mean speaking intelligibly. It is not necessary, therefore, to infer from these passages, that to speak with tongues was to speak in a state of ecstasy, in a manner unintelligible to any human being.
8. The common interpretation is also consistent with the fact that the gift of interpretation was distinct from that of speaking with tongues. If a man could speak a foreign language, why could he not interpret it? Simply, because it was not his gift. What he said in that foreign language, he said under the guidance of the Spirit; had he attempted to interpret it without the gift of interpretation, he would be speaking of himself, and not “as the Spirit gave him utterance.” In the one case he was the organ of the Holy Ghost, in the other he was not.

Fourth argument. Those who depart from the common interpretation of the gift of tongues, differ indefinitely among themselves as to its true nature. Some assume that the word *tongues* (**glw~ssai**) does not here mean languages,

but *idioms* or peculiar and unusual forms of expression. To speak with tongues, according to this view, is to speak in an exalted poetic strain, beyond the comprehension of common people. But it has been proved from the expressions *new* and *other* tongues, and from the facts recorded in Acts, that the word **glw~ssai** (*tongues*) must here mean languages. Besides, to speak in exalted language is not to speak unintelligibly. The Grecian people understood the loftiest strains of their orators and poets. This interpretation also gives to the word **glw~ssai** a technical sense foreign to all scriptural usage, and one which is entirely inadmissible, at least in those cases where the singular is used. A man might be said to speak in "phrases," but not in "a phrase." Others say that the word means the tongue as the physical organ of utterance; and to speak; *with the tongue* is to speak in a state of excitement in which the understanding and will do not control the tongue, which is moved by the Spirit to utter sounds which are as unintelligible to the speaker as to others. But this interpretation does not suit the expressions *other tongues* and *new tongues*, and is irreconcilable with the account in Acts. Besides it degrades the gift into a mere frenzy. It is out of analogy with all Scriptural facts. The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. The Old Testament seers were not beside themselves, and the apostles in the use of the gift of tongues were calm and rational, speaking the wonderful works of God in a way which the foreigners gathered in Jerusalem easily understood. Others, again, admit that the word *tongues* means languages, but deny that they were languages foreign to the speaker. To speak with tongues, they say, was to speak in an incoherent, unintelligible manner, in a state of ecstasy, when the mind is entirely abstracted from the external world, and unconscious of things about it, as in a dream or trance. This, however, is liable to the objections already adduced against the other theories. Besides, it is evident from the whole discussion, that those who spake with tongues were self-controlled. They could speak or not as

they pleased. Paul censures them for speaking when there was no occasion for it, and in such a manner as to produce confusion and disorder. They were, therefore, not in a state of uncontrollable excitement, unconscious of what they said or did. It is unnecessary to continue this enumeration of conjectures; what has already been said would be out of place if the opinions referred to had not found favor in England and in our own country.

The arguments against the common view of the nature of the gift of tongues, (apart from the exegetical difficulties with which it is thought to be encumbered,) are not such as to make much impression upon minds accustomed to reverence the Scriptures.

1. It is said the miracle was unnecessary, as Greek was understood wherever the apostles preached. This, no doubt, is in a great degree true. Greek was the language of educated persons throughout the Roman empire, but it had not superseded the national languages in common life; neither was the preaching of the apostles confined to the limits of the Roman empire. Besides, this supposes that the only design of the gift was to facilitate the propagation of the gospel. This was doubtless one of the purposes which it was intended to answer; but it had other important uses. It served to prove the presence of the Spirit of God; and it symbolized the calling of the Gentiles and the common interest of all nations in the gospel. See the remarks on Acts 2:4.
2. It is said God is not wont by miracles to remove difficulties out of the way of his people, which they can surmount by labor.
3. Others pronounce it impossible that a man should speak in a language which he had never learnt. But does it thence follow that God cannot give him the ability?
4. It appears that Paul and Barnabas did not understand the

speech of Lycaonia, Acts 14:11-14. The gift of tongues, however, was not the ability to speak all languages. Probably most of those who received the gift, could speak only in one or two. Paul thanked God that he had the gift in richer measure than any of the Corinthians.

5. The gift does not appear to have been made subservient to the missionary work. It certainly was in the first instance, as recorded in Acts, and may have been afterwards.
6. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14:14-19, does not place speaking with tongues and speaking in one's own language in opposition; but speaking with the understanding and speaking with the spirit; and therefore to speak with tongues, is to speak without understanding, or in a state of ecstasy. This is a possible interpretation of this one passage considered in itself, but it is in direct contradiction to all those passages which prove that speaking with tongues was not an involuntary, incoherent, ecstatic mode of speaking.

The passage referred to, therefore, must be understood in consistency with the other passages referring to the same subject. Though there are difficulties attending any view of the gift in question, arising from our ignorance, those connected with the common interpretation are incomparably less than those which beset any of the modern conjectures.

Author

Charles Hodge, (1797-1878), was a leading American theologian of the nineteenth century. Born in Philadelphia, son of an army surgeon, he was educated at Princeton, graduating from the college in 1815 and from the seminary in 1819. His theological studies under Archibald Alexander determined his life-work. He became an instructor at Princeton Seminary in 1820, and remained there for the rest of his life, except for two

years' study in France and Germany (1826-28). He was professor of oriental and biblical literature (1822-40), then professor of theology. His own theology was mainly that of the Westminster Confession with obvious traces of scholastic Calvinism, notably from Turretine. His thought was governed by a high view of verbal inspiration and infallibility. While orthodox Calvinism was declining in American thought generally, and the evolutionary idea was beginning to exert unusual power, Hodge unswervingly defended a super-naturally inspired Bible and thereby placed his stamp upon what came to be called "Princeton theology." This had a powerful influence, not only in his own Old School Presbyterian circles, but in other churches as well.

His writings carried his influence beyond the 3,000 students he taught during a half-century. He started the *Biblical Repertory* in 1825 (later called the *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review,* and after 1836 the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review)* and edited it for more than forty years. His first book, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (1835; 19th ed., 1880), established his scholarship. Among his later works none exerted greater influence than his *Systematic Theology* (3 vols., 1872-73).

He also held a commanding position in the Presbyterian Church. He was moderator of the general assembly (Old School) in 1846, and a prominent member of the missionary and educational boards. In the controversy of 1837 he opposed the New School views of doctrine and polity. When division came, he supported it.

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