

## Just What Is the Nature of the Prayer Language?

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I was in a meeting recently where a man began to offer a prophetic word, but before he finished a woman interrupted him with a message in tongues. It was obvious for several reasons that she was out of order: (1) She interrupted the speaker; (2) she disrupted the service; (3) her utterance in tongues was not interpreted; and (4) her utterance was more in the form of an emotional outburst than a clear, distinct pronunciation of syllables.

It is the last of these reasons that forms the subject of this chapter. What exactly is the nature of the prayer language? Is it an emotional or ecstatic utterance beyond the speaker's control? Is it a language or is it gibberish? If it is a language, must it be an actual foreign language?

Throughout 1 Corinthians 14 the King James translators qualified the word *tongues* by prefacing it with the word *unknown*, which does not occur in the Greek. Anti-Pentecostals, who are quick to point out this insertion, believe that "tongues" are the divinely imparted gift of speaking a foreign language without having learned it; that the gift of tongues was not unknown "gibberish," but rather a human language known somewhere in the world. Others have interpreted this to mean that the King James translators probably meant the language was unknown to the one speaking it, and may have been known somewhere in the world or may not.

More than three hundred years after the King James Version, the translators of the New English Bible replaced the word *tongues* with *ecstatic utterances*. This drew fire from both Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals. The latter did not approve of it because they view tongues as the gift of foreign languages. Pentecostals did not approve of it because the word *ecstatic* implied an act of uncontrollable, uncorked emotion. This idea may well be one of the most widespread myths about tongues.

The truth of the matter is that the prayer language may be used with the same emotional outpouring elicited by opening a can of soup or feeding the cat. Tongues observer Morton Kelsey writes that "one does not have to turn an emotional hair in order to speak in tongues" (*Tongues*, 145). The believer does not wait until his emotions are whipped into a frenzy before praising God with his heart language. He speaks quietly or reverently or joyfully just as he does with every expression of prayer and praise, and the words come every bit as naturally.

Charismatic Lutheran pastor Larry Christenson writes:

In a prayer group of Lutherans and Episcopalians . . . the speaking in tongues will be no more pronounced in its emotional aspect than prayers in English. The reason speaking in tongues is tied to emotionalism in many people's minds is because the practice of it, until quite recently, has been confined almost exclusively to religious groups which follow a rather free and emotional form of worship.

(*Speaking*, p. 83)

When the apostle Paul placed certain restrictions upon tongues, he was addressing those Corinthian believers whose practice of tongues monopolized or disrupted the service and perhaps annoyed or baffled unlearned Christians or unsaved onlookers. Paul was concerned with order and edification.

One cannot read the fourteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians without seeing that Paul was of the opinion that the Christian controls tongues-speaking; tongues-speaking does not control the Christian.

Paul specified, for example, that only one speaker could address the congregation in tongues at a time, and that the speaker was to "keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God" if there was no

interpreter (1 Corinthians 14:28). These rules imply that the tongues -speaker could control himself—unlike the dervishes of pagan religions who achieved a trancelike state and delivered oracles from the gods.

The woman described at the beginning of this chapter, who interrupted a prophetic message with an utterance in tongues, was herself apparently out of control. From where she sat she should have been able to hear the speaker. If she could but still did not restrain herself from speaking in tongues, this would indicate that she was misusing the gift.

This is not to say that our prayers and praises must be based on intellectual understanding or our ability to express them verbally. The language of the heart argues for the opposite. Through those “groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26) the joy that was unspeakable finds fluent expression. And joy unspeakable becomes enjoyable speech. We need only safeguard that we use the gift appropriately and biblically.

There are anti-charismatics who argue heatedly against a prayer language that transcends our natural vocabulary. But why would God limit us to such a feeble word treasury? Many people have difficulty communicating simple things. How can they—or we—possibly express those ineffable feelings that well up from time to time within our innermost beings? Until the manifestation of tongues was recovered from relative obscurity Christians employed groans, sighs, and cries. How valuable these are! And how much more valuable that which God expressly gave to the Church and placed His seal of approval on!

Up to this point I have used several words to designate tongues -speaking. These include heavenly language, prayer language, praise language, devotional language, heart language, spirit or soul language, and transcendent language. Such language is heavenly in the sense that it is neither carnal nor earthly (1 Corinthians 14:14; some readers may be reminded of 1 Corinthians 13:1 here: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels . . .”). It is prayer, praise, and devotional language in that it is offered to God (1 Corinthians 14:2,16, 28). It is actually called thanksgiving in 1 Corinthians 14:16. And tongues can be considered a “personal” prayer language, not in an elitist sense, but in the sense that Paul instructs the Corinthians to keep their tongues between God and themselves and not to share it with other hearers unless there is an interpreter (1 Corinthians 14:2, 28).

Tongues -speaking is a spirit or heart language in that it does not originate in our understanding but in our spirit (1 Corinthians 14:15). For the same reason, charismatic Presbyterian J. Rodman Williams calls it a transcendent language (*Gift*, pp. 29, 133): It transcends the limited human capacities of earthly languages. It would seem that its personal edifying value also transcends that of prayer in our native tongue. It has also been called a love language because it results in praise, adoration, worship, and exaltation of our beloved Lord.

### **Foreign vs. Unknown Languages**

Some anti-charismatics insist that the New Testament manifestation of tongues was the divine impartation of the ability to speak in a foreign language. They continue to argue like this: (1) Linguists have affirmed that the charismatic prayer language is not always a foreign language; (2) New Testament tongues -speaking *was* a foreign language; therefore, (3) The twentieth-century phenomenon of tongues is not the New Testament phenomenon. They can then conclude that Pentecostals and charismatics are duped and that their tongues -speaking is fraudulent and even dangerous.

At least one non-charismatic believes these anti-charismatics started with an ulterior motive in arguing this position: “With the more widespread growth of Pentecostalism, the [foreign] language view became popular among evangelicals who opposed tongues because it so clearly rules out modern tongues” (C. R. Smith, p. 34). Non-Pentecostal J. I. Packer, though he concludes that Pentecostal-charismatic tongues -speaking is not the same as New Testament tongues -speaking, admits that the testimony and life evidence of millions of Pentecostals and charismatics demonstrate that their experience is valuable, worthwhile, and valid for them (*Keep*, pp. 224-225).

Although Packer does not discuss at length his reasons for rejecting twentieth-century tongues -speaking as the New Testament gift, others have been quick to develop what might be called the foreign language view. The first to expound the argument thoroughly was Robert H. Gundry, whose ideas appear as a response to the New English Bible translators’ “ecstatic utterance” rendering in 1 Corinthians. Anti-Pentecostal Thomas Edgar supplemented Gundry’s arguments in his book *Miraculous Gifts* (pp. 108-70). Let’s take a look at the reasons they say biblical tongues were always actual foreign languages.

First, Gundry asserts that the Greek work for “tongue,” *glossa* (from which we get *glossolalia*), usually means *language* (pp. 299-300). Edgar adds that *glossa*, when used in the linguistic sense, always means

*language*. So far, so good unless Gundry and Edgar restrict the word *language* to mean intelligible, known, or human language. Pentecostals and charismatics are indebted to Gundry and Edgar for demonstrating that the tongues of the New Testament were languages—structured, articulate speech—and not delivered by out-of-control, hysterical enthusiasts. But they fail to prove (in my opinion) that these tongues were necessarily translatable earthly languages.

Actually, the lexical evidence suggests otherwise. As non-Pentecostal C. R. Smith asserts, “Every Greek lexicon, or dictionary, states that the word [*glossa*] is also used for unintelligible ecstatic utterances. All of the standard lexical authorities have so understood tongues. It just is not true that when the word does not refer to the physical organ it must refer to a language spoken by some group of individuals” (p. 28). A second argument reinforcing the view that the tongues of the New Testament had to be foreign languages is based upon the word *interpret* or *interpretation*. Gundry and Edgar argue that the Greek word from which we get *interpretation* must be understood as *translation*. This is difficult to understand since that same word is used by Luke to describe Jesus’ expounding of Scriptures to the men he met on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27).

Let’s assume, however, that in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul did not mean *translation* (since we have seen that Paul considered tongues -speaking a language). The word for *interpretation*, therefore, according to Francis A. Sullivan,

could merely have been an apt word to describe what happened when one person spoke out in what sounded like a strange language, and another person gave the meaning of his utterance in plain Greek. It would be only natural to say that the second person “translated” what the first had said. But this would be true whether the “interpreter” actually understood the language that had been spoken, or whether he were given a prophetic insight into the sense of the message that had been spoken in tongues, without actually understanding the “tongue” as such. If the “tongue” sounded like a language, then the interpretation of it into plain Greek would also have sounded like a translation, and that, it seems to me is all that the use of these words necessarily implies.

(Malatesta, p. 35)

In addition, of course, God understands not only our glossolalic utterances, but also the groans and cries of our hearts (Romans 8:26-27). To Him, as I have written elsewhere, “the slightest tension of our souls, the warmth and wetness of our tears, reach linguistic formulation. He is indeed the Great and Ultimate Interpreter” (*Paraclete*, Fall 1986: 14).

A third argument for tongues being actual foreign languages asserts that Luke clearly refers to foreign languages in Acts 2, and that since he was well aware of Paul’s teaching on tongues, he would not have used the same term Paul used to refer to something different. Therefore (goes this argument), Paul must also have meant *foreign languages* in his first epistle to the Corinthians.

Not necessarily. Writers of Scripture often used the same words with different meanings. There are other differences, too. Luke adds the qualifying adjective *other* in his discussion of tongues (Acts 2:4), and other terms related to language that Paul does not use.

It is also possible to make Luke’s usage of *tongues* conform to Paul’s instead of vice-versa since, as non-charismatic Baptist Dale Moody points out, the Corinthians passage was written first, and “the earliest passage, not the secondary, should control interpretation” (p. 63). This would mean that the tongues of Pentecost (Acts 2) could have been the same as Paul’s praise language, except that God worked the additional miracle of translating the utterances into the actual dialects of some of the observers (C. R. Smith, pp. 34-36; J. R. Williams, *Gift*, p. 31). Moody would also argue that, of all of Luke’s references to tongues, Acts 2 alone portrays tongues as actual foreign languages, and it is inappropriate to force all other instances into its mold.

Edgar and others believe that Luke’s description of the onlookers as hearing the believers “speaking in tongues and praising God” (Acts 10:46) argues for foreign language; otherwise, how did they know they were praising God? But if praise and thanksgiving were already established functions of glossolalic utterances (1 Corinthians 14:16-17), those onlookers would have assumed the believers were praising God. Thus, Luke’s words may actually argue for Paul’s description of the gift as a language for praise and thanksgiving (1 Corinthians 14:16).

Fourth, Gundry argues that the “effectiveness of tongues as an authenticating sign . . . depended on its *difference* from the ecstatic gobbledegook in Hellenistic religion!” (p. 303). This argument mistakenly assumes that Christian tongues were primarily for “authenticating” an apostolic ministry (this will be discussed more fully in the future article “That Glorious Day When Tongues Are Not Needed, Until Then .

. .”). Paul proves by his own practice that this was not the case; tongues were primarily for personal edification (1 Corinthians 14:4, 18-19). Also, there is no proof that the onlookers did not esteem pagan tongues rather than look down upon them, as Gundry assumes. Furthermore, why does Gundry insist that the difference must be one of nature instead of presentation and function?

A fifth argument is based on one of Paul’s illustrations, found in 1 Corinthians 14:10-12, that does have foreign languages in mind:

There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me. Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.

1 Corinthians 14: 10-12

However, arguing from this that Paul always meant foreign languages when he referred to tongues is weak on three grounds. First, Paul’s word for tongues is not used in this illustration. In fact, he seems to have gone out of his way to choose an entirely different word to distinguish between foreign languages and tongues (Conzelmann, p. 236; Meyer, p. 284). Second, it is inconsistent to interpret Paul’s illustration in verses 7-8 *generally* but Paul’s illustration in verses 10-12 *specifically* (Edgar, p. 151). If interpreted specifically, Paul’s illustration in verses 7-8 works against the foreign language view: “Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds [tongue-speech], such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes [interpretation]? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” Third, in verses 10-12 Paul is not calling tongues foreign languages but comparing them to a foreign language not understood by the hearer, which sounds like gibberish (Moody, p. 98; Moffatt, p. 218). The point of both of Paul’s illustrations is that, unless tongues are interpreted, they are of no value to the addressed congregation (Edgar, p. 151).

A similar argument is based on 1 Corinthians 14:21: “In the Law it is written: ‘Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,’ says the Lord.” Here, also, Paul uses a different word than he has been using to refer to tongues. The anti-charismatic position, however, asks us to see a definite parallel between tongues-speaking and Paul’s reference to Isaiah 28:11-12. The problem is apparent: carried to its logical conclusion, such a view mandates that tongues be of the Assyrian dialect spoken by native Assyrians! Obviously, Paul’s reference is to be understood in a more general sense.

Anti-charismatic John F. MacArthur, Jr., argues that in 1 Corinthians 12:10, 28 Paul prefaces the word tongues with a word (*kinds* or *families* of tongues) that indicates he was speaking specifically of foreign languages (p. 160). This is doubtful since, in this context, the word Paul uses for kinds of tongues (*genos*) may refer to the unlimited languages of the soul or different kinds of prayers (see 1 Cor. 14:10). The reference might include celestial or heavenly languages as well. Non-Pentecostals Plummer and Robertson say that *kinds* simply “indicates that the manifestations of this gift varied much” (p. 267). And MacArthur asks us to believe that Paul was thinking of not just individual foreign languages but families of foreign languages, such as Semitic, Indo-Germanic, or Turanian. The argument seems a bit farfetched (Godet, p. 630). Paul’s use of *phḗnē* (*sounds*, or KJV *voices*) with *genos* in 1 Corinthians 14:10 also speaks against MacArthur’s exegesis.

Nowhere does Scripture mandate that tongues-speaking must be a foreign language. There are indications, however, that the nature of tongues is unintelligible, transcendent, and without natural counterpart. Certain verses in 1 Corinthians 14 simply make better sense if tongues are understood in this way. For example, 1 Corinthians 14:2: “Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.” Without divine intervention, in other words, no one can understand an utterance in tongues. Yet if it were a foreign language, would not the utterance be recognizable by native speakers? “The interpretation of tongues demands a special gift of the Spirit . . . not a nationality” (Goudge, p. 134).

Additionally, non-Pentecostal C. R. Smith notes that the foreign language interpretation of this verse (“For anyone who speaks in a *language* does not speak to men. . .”) is contradictory, since “speaking to men” is what human language is for. On the other hand, the Pentecostal-charismatic (and the majority of non-Pentecostal) interpretation of this verse (“For anyone who speaks in a spiritual language speaks not to men but to God”) is not contradictory, but reasonable (p. 31).

The foreign language view leaves open the possibility of Christians or non-Christians exercising interpretation by natural means, whereas interpretation is a gift of the Spirit. Yet Paul does not envision the

Corinthian congregation soliciting “translators” (Malatesta, p. 37); instead, he implies that only through divine intervention (1 Corinthians 14:13) does this ability come. The multilingual composition of Corinth as the port city further strengthens this point, for if an interpreter was needed there, surely the utterances were not merely human languages (Laurentin, p. 91).

In the same vein, some argue against an evangelistic function of tongues. This is not to say God has never used this gift in evangelism, but nowhere in Scripture do you find anyone using the gift of tongues to witness to someone .

. . . Nor would such a gift in the days of the Apostles have been of any great value. Greek was almost always understood, where the Graeco-Roman civilisation had penetrated in the East. . . . Nor does the evidence of I Cor. xii.-xiv. support this view. St. Paul, earnest as he is that all gifts should be used for the edification of the Church, does not bid the Corinthians go down to the harbour, and employ their gift in the evangelisation of the motley crowd which they would find there.

(Goudge, p. 134)

Indeed Paul’s instructions that the Corinthians stop forbidding the speaking of foreign languages is a strange injunction to have to give (14:39).

Verses 14 and 15 of I Corinthians 14 also defy the foreign language view: “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind. . . .” Too many additional qualifiers must be inserted into the verses to make them square with the foreign language view. But no additional qualifiers are needed to make them square with the ineffable language view, which allows a straightforward understanding of the verses.

In verse 28 Paul tells the tongues-speaker to speak to himself and to God when no interpreter is present. One might ask why Paul would advise someone to pray silently to God in a foreign language (and why he boasted about speaking in a foreign language to God more than the Corinthians, verses 18-19). A foreign language would have no value as a sign; and why would it be more edifying than speaking to God in one’s native language? “If tongues were foreign languages it would be reasonable to assume that they were for the purpose of conveying a message to those who understood the language miraculously spoken” (C. R. Smith, p. 33). Why, then, destroy the purpose by speaking silently?

Throughout 1 Corinthians 14 the Greek verb for *speak* is different from the usual word used. This Greek verb, moreover, is often used to signify grunts, noises, cries, babble, chatter, and prattle (Laurentin, p. 62; C. R. Smith, p. 35). The word may convey the idea of either speech or these other variations.

C. R. Smith points out yet another possible fallacy in the foreign language view. “If speaking in tongues involved a supernatural speech in a real language,” he writes, “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!” (p. 26).

The foreign language view seems fraught with difficulties. In addition to the ones I have already noted, I might also point out that the very phrase “speaking in a language” seems redundant. How else is one going to speak? (Moffatt, pp. 207-208). The necessary insertion of “foreign” takes the foreign language view beyond the straightforward reading of the Pentecostal-charismatic view. In both Acts and 1 Corinthians, when Luke and Paul wanted to designate an actual foreign language with the word *glossa*, they used the modifying adjective or prefix *other* (Acts 2:4; 1 Corinthians 14:21). They do not use this additional modifier to describe the charismatic manifestation of tongues.

Also, how was a congregation to know whether an utterance in a foreign language was simply that or was a prophetic utterance spoken by someone who was of a different nationality (language)? Finally, Mark 16:17 describes these tongues that will follow believers as *new* tongues. This adjective seems more appropriate for new spiritual languages than for age-old foreign languages (C. R. Smith, pp. 29-30; Godet, p. 630).

Some might say that the greatest weakness of the foreign language view is that it jettisons a twentieth-century phenomenon that is pumping new life into stale, dry, and worn souls and churches. Tongues is the hallmark of a phenomenon that has motivated Christians to read their Bibles more faithfully, fellowship more happily, attend church more regularly, pray more fervently, witness more effectively, work more committedly, love more sincerely, and care about others more passionately. Yet, certain anti-charismatics would discard this experience in order to keep their personal dogma intact. What a high price to pay!

Numerous non-Pentecostal New Testament scholars and commentaries reject the view (generally anti-Pentecostal) that tongues in the New Testament were always foreign languages. They include the following:

<i>Abingdon Bible Commentary</i>	H. L. Goudge
Henry Alford	F. W. Grosheide
C. K. Barrett	<i>Interpreter's Bible</i>
<i>Beacon Bible Commentary</i>	<i>Lutheran Commentary</i>
<i>Broadman Bible Commentary</i>	H. A. W. Meyer
F.F. Bruce	James Moffatt
Hans Conzelmann	Leon Monis
F.C. Cook	Alfred Plummer
T.C. Edwards	Alan Redpath
C. R. Erdman	A. T. Robertson
C. J. Ellicott	M. R. Vincent
G. G. Findlay	Bernhard Weiss
F. L. Godet	

Though I reject the foreign language view as biblically indefensible, I quickly add that a combination of the gift of tongues and the manifestation of a miracle could produce an actual foreign language (*xenoglossy*). There are many reported cases of xenoglossy, and I thank God for them. Normally, however, tongues will not take such a form. (See my article "Documenting Xenoglossy.")

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