

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

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THIS ARTICLE is not a general discussion of the pentecostal, still less of the charismatic movement which is gaining such prominence today even within the catholic Church. It is proposed only to discuss the biblical foundations of two central phenomena of the pentecostal movement, baptism in the Spirit and the gift of tongues, and to investigate their basis in the New Testament.

First we must establish what is meant among modern pentecostals by these expressions, and what is held to be the relationship between them. This is no easy task, for the movement is by definition charismatic rather than legalistic, and there is little desire to formulate agreed doctrine. In the flood of literature on the subject, both within and outside the catholic Church, we must choose statements; naturally these will not be agreed by all adherents, but they do perhaps constitute a basis from which to work. A sober, perhaps minimalist, definition of baptism in the Spirit runs as follows:

to be baptized in the Spirit means that we have a change in our relationship with God such that we can begin to experience in our lives all the things which God promised that the holy Spirit would do for believers.¹

This is often effected by the imposition of hands by a number of believers, as in the early Church, in the course of a prayer meeting. Imposition of hands is, however, not an essential, and baptism in the Spirit may occur simply in the course of prayer. One such occasion is most movingly described by its recipient when it occurred during group prayer in the benedictine monastery of Pecos in New Mexico; it was only afterwards that he realized that the monks had been praying for him.² Members of the group 'praying over' the recipient is a normal concomitant of baptism in the Spirit. It should be added that those within the sacramental system are united in affirming that they do not consider baptism in the Spirit to be a sacrament in the strict sense. It is not essential to salvation in the way that con-

¹ Clark, Stephen B.: *Baptized in the Spirit* (Pecos, New Mexico, 1971), p 50.

² Wheeler, James, S.J.: 'Pentecostal Experience in a Benedictine Monastery', in *One in Christ* 7 (1971), pp 347-348.

version and regeneration are, but is a preparation for the ministry of witness.³ In general, then, baptism in the Spirit is held to be an experience which consists in the unleashing of the Spirit which is in us by baptism, in becoming aware of the active presence of the Spirit, of the relationship and closeness to the Father which we have as his adopted sons, and of the peace of Christ which passes all understanding. A slightly divergent view – which is to be discussed later – is that baptism in the Spirit consists in the receiving of the Spirit for the first time: ‘according to Luke you can be a christian without having received the Spirit. For Luke as for the pentecostals, the Spirit is something additional to salvation’.⁴

Views about the relationship of the gift of tongues to baptism in the Spirit differ. For some, the gift of tongues appears to be the criterion of having been baptized in the Spirit, whence the slogan ‘No tongues, no baptism in the Spirit’.⁵ Others, however, strongly deny this close connection. Kilian McDonnell, for example, holds that ‘the issue in pentecostalism is not tongues’,⁶ and that those outsiders who think it is, misjudge the movement. Anthropologically, one could say that without tongues there would have been no movement, because this is what separates out a person from the great mass of believers.⁷ Stephen B. Clark gives a middle position which seems to be common, at least among catholic pentecostals, that it is ‘normal’ to have a definite experience when one is baptized in the Spirit, and this is ‘commonly’ the gift of tongues,⁸ or that the gift of tongues is the ‘normal’ first sign of baptism in the Spirit.⁹ However, for others even this goes too far.

Finally, in this resumé of modern pentecostal views on these matters, we must ask what the gift of tongues is. The basic phenomenon is a speaking in a language unknown to the speaker. The language in which this speaking occurs may be recognized as a known language or may not. Pentecostals are not particularly concerned whether the language used is known or not. Dennis and Rita Bennett¹⁰ claim to have known of fourteen different languages used in such speaking which have been recognized. But they are quite happy to leave the question open:

³ Hollenweger, Walter: ‘Charisma and Oikoumene’, *ibid.*, p 339.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Cf Bennett, Dennis and Rita: *The Holy Spirit and You* (New York, 1971), p 89: ‘All baptized-in-the-Spirit believers can and should speak in tongues daily in their prayers’.

⁶ McDonnell, Kilian, *Catholic Pentecostalism* (Notre Dame, 1971), p 9.

⁷ Hollenweger, *art. cit.* pp 311–312.

⁸ Clark, *op. cit.*, p 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp 91–92.

More speaking in tongues would no doubt be recognized as known language and could translate. It is also possible that some speakings in tongues are languages of angels.¹¹

A person may be endowed with different languages at different times, but also has a private devotional language which he can use at will in his own prayers (it is recognized as the same language by the fact that the same words come again and again).¹² When any tongue, known or unknown, is spoken, there may be someone who interprets, by the gift of the Spirit; the interpretation renders the gist or general sense of what is being said in such a way that different interpreters will give the sense in different words; it is almost as though the sense passes from speaker to interpreter without the mediation of the language.

It is important to ask what is felt to be the function of the gift of tongues. It occurs both in public and in private, and although such speaking in public normally serves for the building up of those who witness it, both the public and more especially the private manifestations are primarily a prayer, not a wonder for their own sake. 'It is not the foreign tongue itself which is important . . . It signifies the fact that the holy Spirit is the principal author of the given prayer, even more than the person who utters it'.¹³ It is valuable as an assurance of the presence of the Spirit. 'It is not that tongues is a superior kind of prayer, just that it is another very valuable kind'.¹⁴

II

In the examination of the New Testament evidence, the first point to be recognized is that manifestations of the Spirit are perfectly normal signs of christianity; they seem to be the norm rather than the exception. Luke of course is the evangelist of the Spirit. At the baptism of Jesus it is clearer in Luke than in the other synoptic gospels that the only significant part of this scene is the descent of the Spirit; the baptism itself is passed over with a mere past participle which does no more than give the occasion, 'when Jesus had been baptized';¹⁵ more significant, especially in view of the pentecostals' strong emphasis on prayer as all-important and as a condition of receiving the Spirit, is the present participle, 'and as he was praying'. Besides being the evangelist of the Spirit, Luke is also the

¹¹ Cf 1 Cor 13, 1.

¹² Dennis and Rita Bennett, *op. cit.*, p 92.

¹³ O'Connor, Edward D.: *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church* (Notre Dame, 1971), p 125.

¹⁴ Wallis, Arthur: *Pray in the Spirit* (London, 1970), pp 86-87.

¹⁵ Lk 3, 21.

evangelist of prayer – the combination is important – and his gospel emphasizes that Jesus prays at all the important turning-points, while in the Acts the prayer-life of the early community is given especial prominence. Luke is, however, not alone in his emphasis on the Spirit at the beginning of Jesus's messianic ministry, for John does not mention the baptism of Jesus at all, and lets the Baptist point out only that he saw the Spirit come down upon him.¹⁶ It could be argued that after giving the coming of the Spirit such prominence, at the beginning at least, these two evangelists see the whole of Jesus's ministry as the manifestation and working out of this Spirit.¹⁷

Certainly in the Acts of the Apostles it is the coming of the Spirit which sets everything in motion, and this is normally followed by the gift of tongues. Such is the case at Pentecost, and at the so-called 'Pentecost of the gentiles', when the Spirit comes upon Cornelius and his household.¹⁸ The same is true at Ephesus.¹⁹ To keep the balance, however, it is very important to note that the gift of tongues (and the closely related gift of prophecy) are not the only manifestations of the Spirit in the first communities. The manifestations at Samaria were obviously visible, both in their absence before the reception of the Spirit and in their presence after it (Acts 8, 16–19 – a very significant passage to which we will return), though we are not told what they were. In view of Luke's stress on the presence of the Spirit in the community and equally on the life-style of the early community, we must assume that we are to see the two as connected, and the descriptions of life in the early community as being a manifestation of the presence of the Spirit. The summaries describing this mention not only the signs and wonders worked by the apostles, but also (and more frequently) the complete sharing among the community, prayer, and especially unanimity and care for each other, all summed up in joy and simplicity of heart.²⁰ It is a return of messianic peace and joy to men. Let it not be said that these are less striking, less miraculous or less important than the more dramatic manifestations of the Spirit: at any rate they are felt to be equally central – or rather more central – to the heart of the modern pentecostal movement.

Paul has the same mixture of dramatic and undramatic gifts of the Spirit. He can give as criteria of the presence of the Spirit such a

¹⁶ Jn 1, 33.

¹⁹ Acts 19, 6.

¹⁷ E.g. Lk 4, 18–21.

²⁰ Acts 2, 42–47; 4, 32–35.

¹⁸ Acts 10, 44–6.

list as 'love, joy peace, patience, etc.,²¹ and at another time discuss the more spectacular gifts such as prophecy, tongues and interpretation, the gift of healing and miracles, lumping them with what we would consider more humdrum achievements like teaching and administration.²² He himself had the gift of tongues more than any of them,²³ and himself worked miracles, but does not set too much store by either of these.²⁴ Perhaps the crux of the matter is that, writing to the galatians, he can point to the manifestations of the Spirit among them as proof of the point he is arguing, obviously in the sure knowledge that the fact that there are such manifestations cannot be denied.²⁵

I have stressed the wider evidence because it is equally important for the evaluation of the New Testament evidence and of the pentecostal movement that the more dramatic gifts of the Spirit be put in their context. There are of course excesses,²⁶ but on the whole it is true that the more dramatic gifts have attracted more attention outside than inside the pentecostal movement. In general, pentecostals seem to take the more unusual manifestations (for the sake of argument I am temporarily assuming that love, sharing, prayer, etc., are usual phenomena) extraordinarily for granted, and do seem to see them in their context. There is, however, a point on which it is important to take issue here with at least some non-catholic pentecostal tendencies, namely that baptism in the Spirit normally comes to one who has already been a christian for some time, though without the Spirit.

III

This doctrine is evolved, I suspect, to deal with the situation that the experience called baptism in the Spirit often does occur, as a sort of second conversion, to those who are already christians in such a way that they feel that they have never experienced the Spirit before. Correspondingly, their life takes on a new fervour – and perhaps shows dramatic manifestations of the Spirit – which makes their christianity quite new. The theory is founded principally on three passages in the Acts. I would maintain that these passages are misinterpreted, and that the experience which is referred to had

²¹ Gal 5, 22.

²² 1 Cor 12, 14.

²³ 1 Cor 14, 18.

²⁴ Rom 15, 17–19.

²⁵ Gal 3, 2–5.

²⁶ Kildahl, John P., *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (London, 1973), shows that pentecostals are neither more nor less unbalanced than the commonalty of people. But I am discussing the theory of pentecostalism rather than the fringe phenomena.

better be described as an unleashing of the Spirit, or giving full rein to the Spirit, rather than a reception of the Spirit *de novo*.

In general, it is clear that the New Testament cannot envisage a christian who has not received the Spirit. This is crystal clear in the writings of Paul; but the pentecostal theory is built upon Acts, which is said to provide exceptions which are crucial. It is merely, they would say, that cases of christianity without the Spirit, now so frequent, were then extreme rarities, so do not figure in Paul. The first passage which is alleged to show that the Spirit comes sometime after conversion and regeneration is Pentecost: the 120 disciples who received the Spirit were, it is claimed, already christians. But it is clear that for Luke the new age begins at Pentecost; the age of Christ ends with the ascension, and the new era, the era of the Church, begins ten days later; it is not until then that the disciples, including the apostles, enter upon their full relationship with the Father. Luke certainly gives no indication that the apostles or disciples were full christians before this, and the only evidence cited by pentecostals is Luke 10, 20, 'your names are written in heaven', which proves nothing.

A passage at first sight more favourable to the pentecostal claim is the account of the events in Samaria: the samaritans had been baptized, but had not yet received the Spirit. James Dunn,²⁷ however, shows clearly that what Luke intended to do was to contrast their insufficient faith, mere wonder at the signs and miracles worked by Philip,²⁸ with their conversion by Peter and John, and with Simon Magus's failure to progress beyond wonder and admiration at the power of the apostles; they received the Spirit while he received only a curse. But the chief point is that they had not really been christians in the first place. The same is true of the third case cited, the disciples of John at Ephesus.²⁹ They are called disciples, it is true, before they receive the Spirit, and they had already been baptized. But the word 'disciples' is not used in its technical sense of christians (it is the only passage in Acts where it lacks the definite article), and they are explicitly said to have been baptized into John's baptism; it is not even clear that they had heard of Jesus, and so there is no reason to suppose that they were in any sense christians, or anything more than pious jews baptized into the community of those awaiting the messiah. By contrast, as soon as they are baptized

²⁷ For what follows I am greatly indebted to his excellent book, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London, 1970).

²⁸ Acts 8, 13.

²⁹ Acts 19, 1-16.

'into the name of the Lord Jesus', they receive the holy Spirit, speak in tongues and prophesy,³⁰ just as had the disciples at Pentecost and Cornelius with Peter. There is, then, no reason to doubt that the presence of the Spirit is for Luke the very hallmark and criterion of the christian, and that becoming a christian and receiving the Spirit are necessarily simultaneous, a normal evidence of this (though not, for instance, in Paul's case, according to Acts) being the gift of tongues and prophecy.

IV

About the gift of tongues itself, there are, from the scriptural point of view, two elements to examine: its use and its content. About its use Paul is reserved, more reserved than about any other of the gifts of the Spirit which he examines. About prophecy he is hesitant: on the one hand he says that there should not be too much of it, that two or three suffice at an assembly; but then again he says that all may prophesy one by one, and his chief concern – writing to that unruly and heterogeneous community which was the corinthians – is for peace and order.³¹ On the other hand he finally encourages the brethren to be eager for prophecy.³² About tongues the most enthusiasm he can muster up is: 'Do not prevent it'.³³ His prime principle in the use of such gifts in the assembly is the benefit of the community, and he concentrates on the negative effect, the unintelligibility, unless there is an interpretation, strangely neglecting the beneficial effect even unintelligible speaking in tongues will have on others present by demonstrating to them the immediacy of the Spirit. He regards it merely as a sign to unbelievers, and for their sake and that of those uninitiated in the matter (*idiotai*) he is acutely conscious of the unfavourable impression it would make if everyone were speaking in tongues at once.³⁴

Pentecostals, however, seem similarly to be aware of these dangers.³⁵ The gift of tongues is primarily for use in private prayer (about which Paul has practically nothing to say,³⁶ since he is here concerned with order in the eucharistic assembly, and in regulating the use of the gifts of the Spirit there), and there is awareness that the exercise of this gift in a small group, and in a large, more heterogeneous group, should be different. In the former all may together

³⁰ Acts 19, 6.

³¹ 1 Cor 14, 29–33.

³² 1 Cor 14, 39.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ 1 Cor 14, 14–25.

³⁵ E.g. Dennis and Rita Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp 89–91.

³⁶ Cf 1 Cor 14, 4.

speak in tongues, forming a united prayer of praise; in the latter, speaking in tongues is considered more from the point of view of prophecy, and when one speaks in tongues, attention is normally diverted to all praying for an interpretation.

A final point to examine is the content of the gift of tongues. Is the language spoken a real language or not, a tongue of men or a 'tongue of angels'? 'Classical pentecostals would insist that tongues are a true language, and most neo-pentecostals, protestant and catholic, usually agree'.³⁷ In the New Testament, Paul gives no suggestion that the tongues used are genuine languages, and perhaps the lack of this suggestion is one negative indication; but then of course Paul had no idea of the immense multiplicity of languages and dialects which exist in the world. I myself can see no point in the Spirit being careful enough to inspire only words and phrases which are or have been actually used among men, especially when interpretations also rely on direct inspiration rather than being translations made by someone who happens to know the language.

But the expectation that they should be real languages is no doubt connected with the interpretation of the scene at the first Pentecost. The problems connected with this text are manifold. To begin with, the phenomenon of speaking in intelligible languages unknown to the speakers is without parallel in the New Testament.³⁸ Secondly, one is at a loss to know why the hearers, hearing their own languages spoken, should think that the speakers were drunk – unless it was their sheer exuberance.³⁹ Thirdly, it is unclear whether the miracle is thought of as being on the part of the speakers or on the part of the hearers: that is, whether the speakers were speaking in foreign tongues or the hearers hearing in their own language what was spoken in the native tongue of the speakers. Fourthly, did the multilingual audience divide into groups and listen to the speaker who happened to be speaking their own language? Was it simply a babble of different languages emanating from all 120 speakers in an undifferentiated mass?

The solution is a literary one. It is now generally accepted⁴⁰ that Luke, in this early history of the Jerusalem Church, is composing

³⁷ McDonnell, Kilian: *Catholic Pentecostalism*, p 18. But he goes on to say that the controlled situation necessary for scientific testing seldom obtains, and that most catholic pentecostals are anyway rather impatient with what they regard as a peripheral question.

³⁸ Acts 2, 11.

³⁹ Acts 2, 13.

⁴⁰ Cf. E. Haenchen's authoritative commentary *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1965), or J. P. Charlier, *L'évangile de l'enfance de l'église* (Brussels and Paris, 1966).

little panels or tableaux in which a great deal of the meaning is given by means of reference and allusion to biblical scenes. This midrashic technique is used elsewhere in the New Testament; in Luke the scene of the Annunciation is a well-known example. In this scene of Pentecost, he certainly uses the Jewish legend that at the giving of the law on Sinai the Word of God came down upon the people in the form of fire; this fire divided itself into seventy tongues, so that it should be available to all the seventy nations (a symbolic number) of the earth. In Luke's account, the names of the countries from which the hearers are drawn is probably founded on an astral catalogue and intended to represent similarly all the nations of the world. The message, is, in both Old and New Laws, that the word of God is meant for all men. With this biblically-founded symbolism, Luke has combined the phenomenon current in the earliest communities of speaking in strange tongues. The combination is not wholly successful and results in the contradictions which we have outlined. If this view is correct, there is no evidence in the New Testament that the gift of tongues included speaking in unknown but genuine languages used somewhere for normal human communication.

To sum up, then, it seems that an examination of the New Testament evidence suggests only two hesitations about the phenomenon of pentecostalism: there is no possibility according to the New Testament of a temporal gap between becoming a Christian and receiving the Spirit, and there is no New Testament evidence for speaking in unknown but human tongues. Apart from these two restrictions, there is no evidence from the New Testament that the pentecostal movement may not be an authentic flowering of the Spirit in accordance with the work of the Spirit in the earliest Christian churches. A further disagreement must be registered with those who hold that only those who show the gifts of the Spirit like speaking in tongues are true Christians, and the rest are dead wood, Christians only in name. They do indeed have a point: for, if possession of the Spirit is the hallmark of the Christian, this must have some effect and bear some fruit. It is only that insistence on these particular fruits has no warrant in the New Testament; all build up the Body and play their part, but each in his different way according as the Spirit leads.