

Scott A. Starker

ST 845: Spiritual Gifts in the New Testament

Dr. Wayne Grudem

November 22, 1988

Tongues in I Corinthians: Known or Unknown?

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This paper seeks to examine the question of whether or not the phenomenon of I Corinthians was xenoglossia (speaking in an unlearned yet known human language) or glossolalia (speaking in a manner that does not match any known human language whatsoever). Although the answer to this question needs to ultimately come from the Bible itself, it is interesting to note that the phenomenon known as “speaking in tongues” has been studied by linguists, psychologists and other professionals whose results might also be useful. In order to be able to include some of the results of these studies it is necessary to make a connection between the Biblical gift of speaking in tongues and the present day phenomenon. Therefore, acknowledging dependence on arguments opposed to “cessationism”¹, the writer of this paper has assumed that “speaking in tongues” is a valid gift of the Spirit for the Church today. However, this does not mean that all such occurrences are necessarily the result of the Holy Spirit but that it would not be unreasonable to expect that some of them are. Thus, results of scientific investigation of valid instances of speaking in tongues today could reveal information about the nature of tongues in I Cor. 14.

Tongues on the day of Pentecost as described in Acts chapter 2 seems to have been a clear case of xenoglossia. Luke describes the disciples as speaking in other tongues and cites the “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) as saying, “...each of us hears them in his own native language...” (Acts 2:8). Further, after listing the nations from which the visitors had come Luke quotes them again, “—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts 2:11). It should be noted that no translation was required. The visitors apparently did not expect this of the disciples because they were Galileans (Acts 2:7). Since this seems to be such a clear case of xenoglossia can it be assumed that the phenomenon of tongues as described by Paul in I Corinthians (Cor.) chapter 14 was also xenoglossia? It appears that most people on either side of the issue do not wish to assume anything!

Two people who have argued that the phenomenon of I Cor. 14 was also xenoglossia are J.G. Davies and Robert H. Gundry. Davies did a rather thorough word study of “herm,neuein” and its cognates in the LXX and New Testament (NT) and found 21 occurrences. He suggests that although it can be used to mean “satire” (one occurrence) and “explanation” (two occurrences) its

¹ See *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* by Dr. Wayne Grudem and *Showing the Spirit* by Dr. D.A. Carson for two such works.

primary function (18 times) was to refer to a “translation” of a foreign language and so should be taken this way in I Cor. 14. His own study, however, should have warned him that because *it is possible* for the word to mean “explanation” (*i.e.* “interpretation”) he should therefore not force the most common meaning of the word onto the text without considering the context. His second main point is that “translation” would best match Paul’s use of Isaiah 28:11-12 in his argument in I Cor. 14:20f.² Isaiah warned the people that God would speak to them “with foreign lips and strange tongues” referring to the Assyrian invasion of Israel. Paul would then be using the passage from Isaiah to show that as God had used foreign languages as an indication of his displeasure and judgment toward Israel in the Old Testament (OT) so he was also doing now through the gift of tongues in the church in Corinth toward unbelievers (I Cor. 14:20-25). Although Davies seems to get at the correct use of Isaiah by Paul here, he also seems to push Paul’s illustration too far. He assumes that because Isaiah was referring to actual “foreign languages” then so must Paul. Even though Isaiah was referring to “foreign languages” Paul could have been referring to something equally as unintelligible without it being a “foreign language.” Thus, Davies’ arguments seem unconvincing.

Gundry cites Davies’ arguments without strengthening them. He also adds a few of his own and thus determines that speaking in tongues in Acts 2 and I Cor. 14 is “the miraculously given ability to speak a human language foreign to the speaker.”³ Using Hatch and Redpath he determines that “glwssa” occurs about 30 times in the LXX with the sense of normal language. It only occurs twice (Isaiah 29:24, 32:4) with the sense of stammering. He does not, however, answer the obvious question that arises about what word he would have expected Paul to have used to describe a phenomenon that sounded like a language but was not known. It seems reasonable to assume that Paul would have used “glwssa” in such a situation. He also argues that “mystery” in I Cor. 14:2 does not imply ecstasy but refers to spiritual truth regardless of the mode of communication.⁴ This is a fruitless argument in that it adds nothing to our understanding of the nature of tongues. He also writes concerning speaking in tongues in I Cor. 14 that, “It is unintelligible not because it is an ecstatic language, but because (and when) neither the speaker nor anyone else in the congregation happens to have the gift of interpretation.”⁵ It seems that Gundry is so concerned that speaking in

² J.G. Davies, *Pentecost and Glossolalia*, Journal of Theological Studies volume 3 (1952) p. 230.

³ Robert H. Gundry, ‘*Ecstatic Utterance*’ (*N.E.B.*)?, Journal of Theological Studies volume 17 (2, 1966) p. 299.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

tongues should not be viewed as ecstatic that he does not see any other option but that it must be understood as a language that is known somewhere in the world. He points out that in the congregation at Corinth there would not have been the numbers of people with varied linguistic backgrounds such as on the Day of Pentecost. Therefore, any language other than Greek, Latin, (and possibly Aramaic) would probably not have been understood by anyone there and they would have needed an interpreter. He concludes from this that tongues in Corinth was different from “the ecstatic gobbledygook in Hellenistic religion!”⁶ But, as Carson writes, “Everything turns on the definition of ‘ecstatic’.”⁷ If by “ecstatic” Gundry means a loss of self-control then he is right about tongues in I Cor. 14 not being ecstatic. Indeed, he seems to set up a straw man by equating ecstasy with “uncontrolled excitement” and then proceeds to knock it down by comparing it to the self-control that is called for in I Cor. 14:28.⁸ His argument becomes useful only against a position that says that speaking in tongues involves a lose of control over oneself. However, H. Newton Malony, Director of Programs in Psychology and Theology in the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, did a study of psychological changes during speaking in tongues via the Kirlian (negative photography) method which did comparisons between resting, prayer-in-English, and prayer-in-tongues between glossolalic and non-glossolalic Presbyterians. He concludes, “No evidence for significant physiological changes during the phenomenon was observed. Trance state was not evident.”⁹ Gundry has overlooked the fact that “ecstasy” can also express varying degrees of emotional exaltation with no accompanying loss of self-control. With this last definition of “ecstasy” it would be proper to refer to one’s experience of speaking in tongues along biblical guidelines as ecstatic. It seems that neither Davies nor Gundry provides an airtight case against any other alternative to seeing xenoglossia in I Cor. 14. Also, they do not succeed in showing that the nature of tongues in I Cor. 14 can only be described by xenoglossia. What arguments can be made on the other side of the issue?

Contrary to the limited options for the nature of tongues in I Cor. 14 as provided by Davies and Gundry, Vern Poythress writes:

The major alternatives are (a) a connected piece of a known human language [xenoglossia]; (b) a piece not identifiable as a known human language, but having a language-like

⁶ Ibid., p. 303.

⁷ D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) pp. 77-78.

⁸ Robert H. Gundry, ‘*Ecstatic Utterance*’ (*N.E.B.*)?, *Journal of Theological Studies* volume 17 (2, 1966) p. 306.

⁹ H. Newton Malony, *Debunking Some of the Myths about Glossolalia*, *Journal of American Scientific Affiliation*, (1982) pp. 147-148.

structure according to the criteria of modern linguistics; (c) a piece with fragments from known human languages, but with other unknown parts; (d) a piece without fragments from known human language, having linguistic deviations from patterns common to human languages, yet being indistinguishable by a naïve listener from a foreign language; (e) disconnected pieces, muttering, groaning, and other miscellaneous material easily distinguishable from normal human verbal utterance.¹⁰

It should be noted that “glossolalia” could be used to refer to anything from categories (b) through (e). Thus, tongues need not be limited to either a known language that is unknown to the speaker or “ecstatic babbling” by a person who has lost his self-control. Citing behavioral science research done by William J. Samarin, Poythress notes that much of modern tongues belongs to category (d). A few cases, however, can be found to fit in category (c).¹¹ These results eliminate category (b) as a possibility. However, category (a) still seems to be possible as it has already been seen that the tongues in Acts 2 were of this category. Category (e) seems to be excluded from legitimate cases of tongues by the very arguments that Davies and Gundry offer. In fact, it must be insisted upon that legitimate tongues must carry some cognitive content. After referring to word studies of *glwssa* Carson writes that tongues “may be enigmatic and incomprehensible, but not noncognitive.”¹² This would be supported by the fact that I Cor. 14 tells us that unless there is a “translation” no one understands the person who speaks in tongues (I Cor. 14:2, 5). Thus, we would expect that an actual *translation* (*i.e.* conversion of the cognitive content expressed through one “language” into an equivalent expression in another) would be possible by a person who possessed the appropriate spiritual gift. [Note: Carson seems to push Poythress’ idea of a “coded language” too far by labeling it as a separate category.¹³ Although a “coded language” is possible it is not necessary to see it as a separate option let alone the only valid option here. It is useful as an illustration but as Poythress writes, “It is impossible not only in practice, but even in *theory*, for a linguist to devise a means of testing this claim.”¹⁴]

In order to investigate further, Poythress offers the following working definition:

Free vocalization occurs when (1) a human being produces a connected sequence of speech sounds, (2) he cannot identify the sound-sequence as belonging to any natural language that

¹⁰ S. Poythress, *The Nature of Corinthian Glossolalia: Possible Options*, Westminster Theological Journal volume 40 (1) (1977) pp. 132-133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹² D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) pp. 80-81.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 85-86.

¹⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *Linguistic and Sociological Analyses of Modern Tongues-Speaking*, Westminster Theological Journal 42 (2) (1980) p. 375.

he already knows how to speak, (3) he cannot identify and give the meaning of words of morphemes (minimal lexical units), (4) in the case of utterances of more than a few syllables, he typically cannot repeat the same sound-sequence on demand, (5) a naïve listener might suppose that it was a unknown language.¹⁵

What he labels *T-speech* is Christian (*i.e.* produced by a person who claims to be a Christian) religious (*i.e.* produced for the purpose or in the context of worship where the person wishes the Spirit to speak through him) competent (*i.e.* produced by a person who already knows at least one natural language reasonably well) free vocalization.¹⁶ Using these definitions he goes on to summarize the main results of modern social-scientific research some of which are: The average person can be taught to produce free vocalization; Free vocalization is not likely to lead to a state of trance; There is no psychological danger in free vocalization (in fact “it seems that the capacity for free vocalization is a normal, God-given human capacity); Free vocalization and T-speech cannot normally be distinguished linguistically; Religious free vocalization does occur among some non-Western religions.¹⁷ Although “Social science does provide a plausible naturalistic explanation for T-speech” it seems that, along with so many of our other natural abilities, God can intervene by empowering them (I Cor. 12:7-11) for his glory (eg. healing can be accomplished directly by God or through one’s body’s natural ability to heal itself [with or without the help of doctors and/or medicine]).¹⁸ Nevertheless, Poythress writes, “free vocalization is not an intrinsically miraculous and therefore infallible sign of the working of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹ Free vocalization apparently may also come from “the flesh” as well as from a spirit other than the Holy Spirit and should therefore be tested (I John 4:1-3). By way of summary for this section, Poythress can again be quoted: “In almost all instances, linguists are confident that the samples of T-speech represent no known natural language and in fact no language that was ever spoken or ever will be spoken by human beings as their native tongue.”²⁰ How does this compare to what Paul writes in about tongues in I Cor. 14?

It seems clear that according to I Cor. 14:13-14, tongues (without interpretation) are not understandable to the speaker. Also, it has already been pointed out in this paper that tongues in I

¹⁵ Vern S. Poythress, *Linguistic and Sociological Analyses of Modern Tongues-Speaking*, Westminster Theological Journal 42 (2) (1980) p. 369.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 369-370.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 370-372.

¹⁸ See *Transposition*, by C.S. Lewis in *The Weight of Glory*, pp. 54-73.

¹⁹ Vern S. Poythress, *Linguistic and Sociological Analyses of Modern Tongues-Speaking*, Westminster Theological Journal 42 (2) (1980) p. 373.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 372.

Cor. 14 must be understood to have some cognitive content (see p. 6). This is the reason that Paul can call it a *glwssa* (language) yet without implying that it be a fully developed or formal language. It seems that the passage requires that tongues be understood as something like a language yet it must also be noted that Paul did not qualify his statement in I Cor. 14:4 (“no one understands him”) by saying “no one understands him except for the one who happens to naturally understand the language” and, therefore, seems to have something other than a known language in mind. Indeed, in verse 2 Paul makes a contrast between speaking to God and speaking to men. The one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God implying that it is God who understands him as opposed to men. In I Cor. 14 there is never any mention of tongues being understood by “natural means” apart from the gift of interpretation (translation?). Carson concludes, “Jaquette’s conclusion is unavoidable: ‘we are dealing here not with language, but with verbalizations which superficially resemble language in certain of its structural aspects’.”²¹ These considerations seem to agree with what science has found to be true about present day claims of tongues. All in all, it seems reasonable to conclude that tongues in I Cor. 14 are not xenoglossia but rather glossolalia which correspond to Poythress’ categories (c) or (d).

²¹ D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) pp. 83-84.