

Speaking In Tongues Throughout History

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Introduction

The controversy that exists among Theologians concerning “speaking in tongues” is not a new subject. It is about as old as the Christian Church itself. Paul dealt with the problem of tongues with the Corinthian Church around 57 A.D. Writers following the apostles continued to deal with it. It is not the intention of this writing to prove a biblical existence of tongues, for the Word of God clearly defines itself on that subject. But much of the contention of tongues lies in their continuance following the first century.

Many would like to say they ceased with the apostles. Others contend they lost their usefulness and therefore disappeared. The fact is that they did neither. The following is an accumulation of evidence concerning tongues as found in history.

The Bible is not only a book of Theological knowledge, but also a book of history. All references given in the Word of God are evidence of tongues in the first century. But all Bible students will agree upon the existence of tongues in the New Testament Church. Where the problem lies in the existence of tongues following the death of the apostles.

What is presented here is a history of tongues as it was recorded by numerous men throughout Church history. According to Philip Schaff, a well known writer of Church History, tongues was not confined to the first century.

“The speaking with tongues, however, was not confined to the day of Pentecost. Together with the other extraordinary spiritual gifts which distinguished this age above the succeeding periods of more quiet and natural development, this gift also though to be sure in a modified form, perpetuated itself in the apostolic Church. We find traces of it still in the second and third centuries.”(1)

Tongues In The Second, And Third And Fourth Centuries

Among the Church fathers that lived following the death of John the Revelator in 98 A.D., Montanus of Phrygia stands as a leader in the support of tongues. Eusebius, a fourth century Church historian writes that the followers of Montanus would be “carried away in spirit, and wrought up into a certain kind of frenzy and irregular ecstasy, raving, and speaking, and uttering strange things.”(2)

Because of his teachings, and the practices of his followers, they were forced to withdraw from the accepted church of the early second century and were ultimately labeled as heresy.

Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp who was in turn a pupil of the Apostle John, wrote in his book "Against Heresies"

"In like manner do we also hear many brethren in the Church who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of language and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men and declare the mysteries of God, whom also the apostles term spiritual "(3)

Tertullian, who lived about the same time as Irenaeus in 160-220 A.D, writes a passage in his book "Against Marcion" which challenges Marcion to produce anything among his followers such as was common among Tertullian's.

"Let him exhibit prophets such as have spoken, not by human sense but with the Spirit of God, such as have predicted things to come, and have made manifest the secrets of the heart; let him produce a psalm, a vision a prayer, only let it be by the Spirit in an ecstasy, that is, in a rapture, whenever an interpretation of tongues has occurred to him "(4)

A few years later in the third century, a certain Pachomius was able to "after seasons of special prayer, spoke the Greek and Latin languages, which he had never learned, under the power of the Spirit."(5)

Saint Augustine, who lived in the fourth century (354-430) also wrote: "We still do what the apostles did when they laid hands on the Samaritans and called down the Holy Spirit on them by the laying on of hands. It is expected that converts should speak with new tongues.(6)

TONGUES IN THE DARK AGES

The introduction of the fifth century marks the beginning of the Dark Ages. It is here that the Catholic Church rules with an iron hand and people were killed for not following its teachings.

The absence of writings other than those of Roman Catholic is not surprising. It is the authors opinion that the church was in hiding concerning this time, for I feel that God has always had a Church. Nothing could dare be published or written concerning tongues for fear of it costing their lives. Alexander Mackie in his book, "The Gift of Tongues: puts in this way:

"From patristic times until the power of Reformation had made itself distinctly felt the gift of tongues is an almost forgotten phenomenon. The attention which the Reformation drew to the Scripture is the reason for the reappearance of the gift. Men do not usually have the gift of tongues unless they know there is a gift of tongues."(7)

The first time that tongues appear in the Dark Ages is in the Life of Saint Hildengard, who lived in the twelfth century. She was a German Abbess who was raised in a Catholic cloister but was not educated because she was sickly. Nevertheless, it was recorded that she was able to "interpret Latin scriptures, and speak and interpret an entirely unknown language." Her first experience with this gift is said to have come as a part of a "strange and powerfully moving religious experience, and following a long series of visions which she had not discussed with anyone." This also corresponds to the Encyclopedia Britannica which states that tongues or "Glossolalia" was present "among the mendicant friars of the thirteenth century."

One of these friars was a young Spaniard by the name of Saint Vincent Ferrer, a native of Valencia, who supposedly spoke Limousin the local dialect. The Biographers of Ferrer tell of his ministry reaching and converting people all over Western Europe, many in isolated areas. He was reported to have been understood in the Alpine regions and other parts of Switzerland, in Brittany and Flanders, in the Savoy and Lyons, by people who know only the local tongue. While in Genoa he spoke to a group of men and women of mixed linguistic backgrounds, all of whom were said to have heard him in their own language.(9) The Catholic Encyclopedia notes that many biographers of Saint Vincent have held that he was endowed with the Gift of tongues. This is perhaps the closest parallel of Acts the second chapter that we find recorded in early Church History.

In the first half of the sixteenth century we find the same report about the two Catholic saints, Saint Francis Xavier and Saint Louis Bertrand. Both men were reported to have spoken in foreign language they did not know in the course of their missionary work. The bull by which Bertrand was canonized for his success in missionary “asserts that to facilitate the work of converting the natives, the apostle was miraculously endowed with the gift of tongues.”(10)

TONGUES FROM THE REFORMATION TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

With the birth of Reformation, the Catholic Church no longer asserts iron rule among the Church world. The instances of tongues becomes more and more frequent, beginning with Martin Luther. In a German work, Sauer’s *History of the Christian Church*” it is stated that, Dr. Martin Luther was a prophet, evangelist, speaker in tongues, and interpreter, in one person, endowed with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”(11)

“Soon following Luther came the French sect known as the Jansenists. This group arose in the Roman Catholic Church after the Council of Trent and was subjected to persecution following the issuance in 1705 of a bill condemning them. After persecution began, speaking in tongues was reported among this group.”(12)

Another group in France that exercised the use of tongues were known as the Cevennes. Among them in a revival of religious enthusiasm occurred similar to that of the Jansenists. Newman in “*A Manual of Church History*” tells us that:

Respecting the physical manifestations, there is little discrepancy between the accounts of friend and foe. The persons affected were men and women, the old and the young, Very many were children, boys and girls of nine or ten years of age. They were sprung from the people for the most part unable to read or write, and speaking in everyday life the patois of the province with which alone they were conversant. Such persons would suddenly fall backward, and, while extended at full length on the ground, undergo strange and apparently involuntary contortions; their chests would seem to heave, their stomachs inflate. On coming gradually out of this condition, they appeared instantly to regain the power of speech.... From the mouths of those that were little more than babes came texts of Scripture, and discourses in good and intelligible French such as they never used in their conscious hours.(13)

Some of the French prophets emigrated to England and made converts there, with tongues being a part of the British revival also.

In this same period of time the Encyclopedia Britannica tells of tongues “among the converts of Wesley and Whitefield.” John Wesley once wrote a protest against a Dr. Middleton who wrote “after the Apostolic time, there is not, in all history, one instance...of any person who had even exercised that gift (tongues).” Wesley replied, “Sir, your memory fails you again, it has been heard more than once no further off than the valleys of Dauphiny.”(14)

The atmosphere of the revivals that followed the Wesleyan movement was one of informality, spiritual fervor, and religious enthusiasm. Crying out with groans and sobs in prayer, shouting and uttering of “unintelligible sounds” were common of this early period.”(15)

Another movement that displayed Pentecostal characteristics developed in England during the seventeenth century. They were called the Society of Friends or Quakers. W.C. Braithwaite, in “The Message and Mission of Quakerism,” quotes from Burrough’s preface to Great Mystery:

“While waiting upon the Lord in silence, as often we did for many hours together, we received often the pouring down of the Spirit upon us, and our hearts were glad and our tongues loosed and our mouth opened, and we spake with new tongues as the Lord gave us utterance, and as His Spirit led us, which was poured down upon us, on sons and daughters, and the glory of the Father was revealed. And then began we to sing praise to the Lord God Almighty and to the Lamb forever “(16)

The Quakers were followed in the eighteenth century by a group that surpassed them in religious emotionalism. These were called the Shakers. The roots of the group extend back to both Quakers and the Cevennes, the early leaders having been Quakers who accepted the teaching of the Cevennes when they emigrated to England. Their conduct of worship was much like Pentecostlism in nature:

Some who attended confessed their sins aloud, crying for mercy; some went into a trance-like state in which they saw visions and received prophecies of Christ’s imminent second coming. Others shouted and danced for joy because they believed that the day was at hand for wars to cease and God’s kingdom on earth to begin.”(17)

Along with other spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues was prominent among the Shakers.

Of all the groups mentioned during the Reformation, none has received as much notice as the Irvingites, a sect which developed in Great Britian about 1825. Edward Irving, a popular Presberterian minister in London played an important role in the movement. When several demonstrations of religious enthusiasm occurred in his services, he encouraged them, believing they were of divine origin.

“The Gift of Tongues” was soon to follow and became a part of his services. A strong faction formed against Irving and his followers and ultimately they were turned away from the Presbertarian Church, The result was the formation of the Catholic Apostolic Church, often called “Irvingites” because of the leadership of Edward Irving. This body wrote a “tongues” tenet in its theology.”

Coming over to America, we find another religious sect called the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, commonly known as the Mormon Church, founded by Joseph Smith in 1830. The seventh article of faith of the Latter-Day Saints states that they “believe” in the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of tongues, etc.” Herber Grant, the Seventh President of the Church, commented on this article of faith:

Now, we have had many men who have had the gift of tongues, out in the world, preach this gospel in a language of which they had no knowledge....

Unless the gift of tongues and the interpretation thereof are enjoyed by the Saints in our day, then we are lacking one of the evidences of the true faith.(19)

Back in England, the report of tongues began to appear in the wake of the preaching campaigns of Dwight L. Moody. Dr. R. Boyd, who was a very close friend of the famous evangelist writes concerning one instance:

When I got to the rooms of the Young Men’s Christian Association in Victoria Hall, London, I found the meeting on fire: The young men were speaking in tongues, prophesying. What on earth did it mean? Only that Moody had been addressing them that afternoon.”(20)

As the nineteenth century come to a close, space limits me from listing all the instances of tongues that took place. In 1875 R.B. Swan writes that he and others spoke in tongues. 1879 – W.J. Walthall also receives the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues. In 1880 in Kara Kara, Armenia a strong Pentecostal Movement breaks out with speaking in tongues. The same year tongues is reported in Switzerland, and on and on. This also includes the revival of Topeka Kansas in the 1900’s. All of them are a part of the vast spreading movement of the spirit of God as these last days grow to a close. No one can deny that there is definite historical proof to the presence of tongues in the Church throughout the centuries. God has always had a people called out for his namesake. His word has always been a part of the hearts of men, and so it continues today.

FOOTNOTES

1 Philip Schaff, History of the Apostolic Church, New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1853, pp. 197-198.

2 Klaude Kendrick, The Promise Fulfilled, Springfield, Missouri Gospel Publishing House, 1961, pg. 19.

3 Irenaeus, The Anti-Nicene Fathers, Ten Volume, New York: Charles Scribner’s 1885, Book III pg. 531.

4 Tertullian, The Anti Nicene Fathers, Ten Volume, New York: Charles Scribner’s 1885, Book III pp. 445-447.

5 Carl Brumback, What Meaneth This, Gospel Publishing House, Springfield, Missouri, 1947 pg. 91.

6 John Sherril, *They Speak with Other Tongues*, Revell Company: Westwood, New Jersey, 1964 pg. 76.

7 Alexander Mackie, *The Gift of Tongues*, New York: Doubleday and Company 1950.

8 *Encyclopedia Britannica* 24 Volume, Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannia Inc. 1951, XXII, pg. 283.

9 *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 Volume, New York: Robert Appleton Co. 1912 XV, pg. 438.

10 *Ibid*, pg. 439.

11 Carl Brumback, *What Meaneth This?* Springfield Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1961, pg. 20.

12 Klaude Kendrick, *The Promise Fulfilled*, Springfield Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1961, pg. 20.

13 Albert Henry Newman, *A Manuel of Church History*, 2 Volume Philadelphil: American Baptists Publication Society, 1903 II pg. 478.

14 Carl Brumback, *What Meaneth This?*, Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1947, pg. 92.

15 Klaude Kendrick, *The Promise Fulfilled*, Springfield Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1961, pg. 23.

16 Carl Brumback, *What Meaneth This?*, Spingfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1947, pg. 93.

17 Marguerite Melcher, *The Shaker Adventure*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941, pg. 5.

18 Klaude Kendrick, *The Promise Fulfilled*, Springfield, Missouri: Gospel Publishing House, 1947, pg. 93.

19 *Ibid*, pg. 24.

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