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IS THERE A PRAYER LANGUAGE?
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A new note has been introduced recently into the discussion of unknown tongues as it is practiced in "charismatic" or "neo-Pentecostal" circles. It is speaking of tongues as "prayer language."

From the start, there have been observable differences between the teachings and practice of the "neo-Pentecostals" and the earlier Pentecostalism. "Pentecostalism" is generally used to describe the denominational groups whose modern genesis was the Parham revival in Topeka, Kans., in 1901 and the Azusa Street movement in Los Angeles in 1907.

For one thing, the characteristic theological innovation of the older Pentecostalism was the clearly stated doctrine that speaking in tongues is the essential, initial, physical evidence of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. This idea never existed in the Church before the twentieth century. It is generally muted in neo-Pentecostal circles, although still stated in publications of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship.

Neo-Pentecostalism, further, is not denominational. It has flourished chiefly in some of the more formal or ritualistic churches.

Older Pentecostalism was often marked by the use of unknown tongues in public church services. Neo-Pentecostalism almost exclusively uses unknown tongues in small charismatic circles or in private devotions.

It is this last aspect of the charismatic movement that gives occasion for the question of the title. Unknown tongues is increasingly referred to as a "prayer language" in which, presumably, the spirit of the worshiper prays in a language he does not understand but which in some way conveys his thoughts and desires to the Lord.

A letter recently received illustrates this idea. The correspondent describes her earlier sense of inadequacy in helping other people, and frustration in seeking entire sanctification. She continues:

"Then through a series of events I was taken to hear Dennis Bennett [the Episcopal priest who has been one of the leaders in neo-Pentecostalism on the west coast] speak on the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a beautiful, serene Anglican church. He spoke simply, but emphatically on Cornelius' conversion, and his infilling (Acts 10) -- then asked all who had prayer requests to write them on a piece of paper, and wait our turn for prayer.

"I had two requests -- one for a friend in our church, the other that I receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. By this time I was prepared for whatever way the 'Giver' would reveal himself to me, and anxious that I know of a certainty that the work was done.

"It was quiet, blessed, and words cannot adequately express the way the Holy Spirit poured out -- filled -- overflowed, from within my being. Tongues, the spiritual language of my soul, is real, vital and relevant. Never have I felt 'taught of the Spirit' as I have since this experience.

"Tongues is an active part of my daily devotion and even as I write I sense the constant intercession of being in contact with my Maker.

"God is not the Author of confusion, so I do not share what I am sharing here unless I feel directly led to do so, and then His Holy Spirit protects or guides accordingly."

The balance of the letter and its entire tone give every evidence of sincerity and genuine love for the Lord and the things of God.

There is, of course, even here a sense of the fact that in some way tongue-speaking is an "evidence" that enables the lady to "know of a certainty that the work was done." Even when neo-Pentecostals do not say it, the almost inevitable implication of what they do say about their speaking in tongues is that what happened with them will also happen to any who "really" get the blessing.

Before going to the theme of these reflections, let me put beside the letter above another letter, received by Youth Executive Paul Skiles from a girl who was sanctified at International Institute at Estes Park in July, 1970. It reads in part:

"I couldn't begin to tell you what God has done for me. I have come back a completely changed person. My attitude, thinking, and all have been changed.

"My family and friends have all noticed. Before, I was so torn; now I am at peace. I'm really happy and thrilled with God. I knew Him before, but never like this.

"I'm excited about serving Him. I witness now and I love it. The more I witness, the more I want to. Mainly because now I really have something to witness about.

"I have my own devotions now, and it really works. No matter what I'm doing, I just know He's right there beside me. I used to let others around me defeat me, but now my eyes are really on Jesus."

Allowing for minor differences by reason of an age differential, the testimonies are remarkably similar. The conspicuous difference is that in the latter there has been no unknown tongues.

Viewing both cases together, one is also impressed with another distinction. It is the presence, in the first case, of Father Bennett, one of the most persuasive exponents of the neo-Pentecostal experience.

This is a factor upon which Missionary-Evangelist E. Stanley Jones commented on the basis of his long and worldwide experience: "Millions have been filled with the Spirit and never speak in tongues. And moreover, this must be said: only where it is taught that tongues accompanies the coming of the Holy Spirit does this phenomenon occur.

"I have been in revivals where a whole college was converted, every single student, and people coming in from surrounding countryside would be stricken by the power of the Holy Spirit before they entered the auditorium, stricken as they entered the campus, and converted. And yet no one spoke in tongues.

"Why? It wasn't taught. It was taught that the signs that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit were 'love, joy, peace,' etc., resulting in a changed character.

"In these modern manifestations of speaking in tongues it is not only taught -- it is often induced. A group will gather around the seeker and lay hands on his head and the seeker is sometimes urged to use some foreign words he may know to start the flow."

In asking, "Is there a 'prayer language'?" the question is not whether some do actually utter ecstatic or unintelligible sounds in the attitude and intention of prayer. It is whether such a language is an authentic "gift of the Spirit" (charisma) in the sense in which this term is used in I Corinthians 12:4, 9, 28, 30-31.

A closely related parallel question is whether the pneumatikos ("spiritual things" of I Corinthians 14:1 and 37) is the same as the charismata ("grace gifts") of I Corinthians 12. An

identical translation in the KJV hides what may be a very important distinction. Nowhere in chapter 14 does Paul describe the Corinthian practice as a charisma or "grace gift."

The following points are pertinent to these questions:

1. The Bible generally assumes that while prayer may be wordless -- whether in the mood of communion or intercession -- it is always communication from person to Person.

On the contrary, it is commonly said that, while the charismatic's consciousness is lost in loving adoration of God, his lips and tongue are occupied with utterances which are without meaning to him.

The "groanings which cannot be uttered" of Romans 8:26 have sometimes been identified as "prayer language" of the Spirit, but since by definition such prayers "cannot be uttered," they are obviously not the same.

In fact, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul make it quite clear that the Holy Spirit's ministry is one of clarification and enlightenment in the mind of the believer. He is "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17), whose mission is to "testify of" Christ (15:26) and to "guide" Christians "into all truth," not speaking of himself but showing us things to come and the things of Christ (16:13-15).

Paul, also, speaks of the Spirit as revealing the things of God to the believer, communicating truth about the deep things of God (I Corinthians 2:9-16).

This does not deny the emotional values in the various kinds of "release" the Spirit may provide, but it does indicate the high value the Scripture places on the office of the Holy Spirit as Teacher. With all the limitations of verbal communication, the fact remains that we still grasp and share the insights we gain by the use of intelligible words.

2. The major biblical passage cited in support of the divine origin of "prayer language" is I Corinthians 14:14 "For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful."

It has often been pointed out that there is no adjective in the original Greek corresponding to "unknown" in the English. This is shown by the use of italics in printing "unknown" in most editions of the KJV. The word used throughout is *glossa*, which in such a context simply means "language."

Without realizing what is happening, many readers of I Corinthians 14 quite unconsciously pass from the meaning of the context -- "language unknown to some or all of the company present" (v. 21) -- to the idea of "language unknown to anyone at all unless gifted with a parallel gift of interpretation."

The context of I Corinthians 14:14 makes Paul's meaning clear. He is not saying, "If I pray in another language, my spirit prays, but my mind does not understand." He is saying, "If I pray in

another language, others may sense my spirit, but what I am saying is not fruitful for them since they cannot also understand."

Because of this, the apostle adds, "I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also." Praying with the spirit and with the understanding are not contrasted; they are identified. It is the edification of those who hear (v. 17) that is to be considered.

3. I Corinthians 14 is clearly designed to limit if not to forbid speaking in languages not locally understood unless the speaking be accompanied by interpretation. It says nothing one way or another concerning the private use of languages in personal devotions.

It is at least passing strange that a feature of personal devotion for which so much is claimed should not be more prominent in the New Testament.

It is not my purpose to limit the liberty of any who might choose to worship God in private devotions in ways that are foreign to the prayer life of the vast majority of God's people throughout the ages. It is, rather, to point out that there is no clear basis in the Bible for such a practice. Its source, Paul suggests (v. 32), is "the spirit" of the one who prays.

4. The failure of "classical" Pentecostalism to establish its thesis that unknown tongues is the only valid initial evidence of the baptism with the Holy Spirit has often been pointed out. Such a teaching involves outright theological error, and must always be met head on.

While the same logical question does not arise in the neo-Pentecostal use of "prayer language," a psychological problem quickly arises. In spite of disclaimers, there is an almost inevitable assumption that one so "gifted" is in some way spiritually superior to other Christians who pray -- perhaps more and with great effectiveness -- in full consciousness of the meaning of the petitions and worship they offer their Lord.

It is this assumption of spiritual superiority that makes the newer emphasis on "prayer language" as divisive and disruptive of Christian fellowship as was the "sign language" of the older Pentecostalism.

Here also we may apply the wise counsel of Dr. J. B. Chapman when as editor of the Herald of Holiness he wrote in January, 1923, concerning the "older" Pentecostalism: "My advice would be that our pastors and members should not be prominent in the matter of cooperating with the 'Tongues' people; but, on the other hand, there is no reason why we should 'go into a tangent' opposing them. We do not gain much by 'fighting' anyone. The best way is for us to go on with the mission God has given us in spreading scriptural holiness over all lands and not allow ourselves to become involved in many controversies. Ours is a positive gospel and our relation to every heterodox movement is that we believe we preach 'something better.' "

Let our attitude be that of the Apostle Paul himself, who in the context of the problems of Corinth said, "And yet shew I unto you a more excellent way" (I Corinthians 12:31).

The Lord Jesus was the One to whom the Father gave the Spirit without measure (John 3:34). He is our supreme Example in prayer. There is no evidence that He ever prayed in any but His native language. We should be satisfied to follow His example in this as in all else.

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THE END