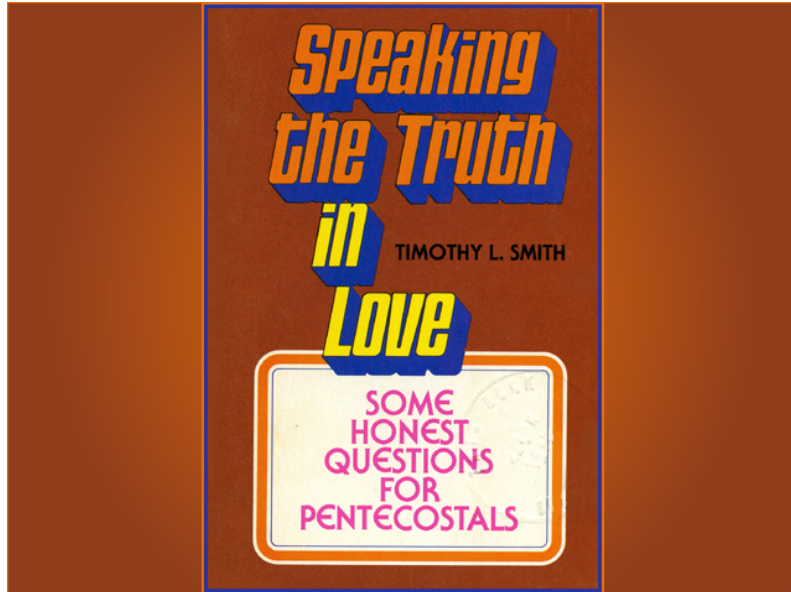


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SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE
By Timothy L. Smith



Some honest questions for Pentecostals presented at the annual meeting of
the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Ann Arbor, Mich., December 3, 1975.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION AND THIS BOOK

This digital publication was created after receiving assurance from Dr. George Lyons of NNU that the author's family had given permission to digitize the books of Dr. Timothy L. Smith. The following information about the booklet is from the back cover thereof:

About This Book. . .

Dr. Timothy L. Smith, professor of history and director of a doctoral program in American religious history at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, was invited to speak before the Society for Pentecostal Studies at its annual meeting on December 3, 1975. In an atmosphere of cordiality and earnest search he presented an "outsider's" point of view to this distinguished body of charismatic scholars, who Dr. Smith reports, "received and discussed it graciously."

By the very nature of the auspices under which it was prepared and presented, this is not an argumentative document, seeking to repudiate and destroy tongues speaking in one blow. It is, rather, a gentle exposure of the uncertain foundations upon which this doctrine rests. It is a message for every sincere inquirer after the truth of this matter.

* * * * *

PREFACE

The Society for Pentecostal Studies, organized in 1970, draws together scholars in the fields of church history, biblical studies, and theology who are closely associated with either the classic Pentecostal denominations or the more recent charismatic movement which has emerged in the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Protestant Episcopal, and other communions. The gathering for December, 1975, was at Ann Arbor, Mich., where the hosts were the Word of God Community, a Roman Catholic charismatic body composed chiefly of chaplains, staff members, students, and faculty of the University of Michigan.

The program committee asked me to deliver the keynote address at the annual dinner meeting, an assignment which they have usually made to a scholar from outside the Pentecostal or charismatic communities. Earlier that same day I also read a paper on "Christian Perfection and American Idealism," which was the essence of a chapter in the history of the Wesleyan holiness movement in America which I am writing in response to a prompting from the Christian Holiness Association.

The classic Pentecostal denominations include several (notably the Pentecostal Holiness church) which at the time of their founding early in this century drew their theological ideas from Wesleyanism, but added to them their special view of the gifts of the Spirit, especially that of speaking in "unknown tongues." The afternoon paper, therefore, dealt with themes which many present could agree about. Those Pentecostals and charismatics whose theological roots are, for example, in Baptist or Fundamentalist doctrines see some issues differently, of course.

I thought that at the dinner meeting I should speak as directly and openly as possible. The spirit of that hour was what Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians aim for in all their gatherings, as do we who are Wesleyans: loving, deeply devotional, and joyous. The musical ensemble sponsored by the Word of God Community sang and played their instruments for perhaps half an hour after dinner, not to entertain but to inspire the time of prayer and praise which was to follow.

As they sang, as well as afterwards, many of those present prayed or praised the Lord quietly -- in a sense almost privately -- speaking in what is called glossolalia. This term refers to what Pentecostals believe is a "tongue" or language whose meanings are known only to heaven. The "words" are not understood on earth either by those who hear them spoken or those who speak unless someone with a "gift of interpretation," as a charismatic believer would say, is inspired by the Holy Spirit to interpret them.

No one did in fact speak up in a public way to offer an interpretation of what was being prayed or said, since the utterances were so quiet as to be essentially personal. But one fine scholar was moved to speak what I think Pentecostals present would have called prophecy. He thanked God for the gift of intellect, and called on those present to celebrate that gift with a renewal of their purpose to use

their minds more earnestly and carefully in the task of understanding God's truth. I spoke immediately afterwards, using as my title, "Speaking the Truth in Love."

Three scholars who had read the address in advance then responded, in what I thought was a generous and affectionate manner, even though their disagreements with me were substantial. Several small groups sat together late into the night discussing both the immediate questions I had raised, and larger ones also concerning the relationship of the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification or "perfect love" to the Pentecostal movement.

Here, then, only slightly revised, is what I had to say that evening. I hope it will be a clarifying and redemptive word to all of you who read it, especially if it finds you in the midst of a personal search for the truth. I have withheld publishing the address until now because it was intended as a pastoral word to my sisters and brothers in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. The members of the society not only received and discussed it graciously, but are publishing it along with the other papers and addresses presented to the conference.

-- Timothy L. Smith

* * * * *

01 -- PART

What a fine experience to sit with a group of Christian scholars interested in the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of men and women and to sense the intensity of your intellectual quest, the great surge of rationality which is going on among you. Jean-Paul Sartre said once at a gathering of French existentialists that the meetings should have been conducted in total silence, since the existential experience is by definition not communicable. Christianity and testimony are, however, inseparable. Popular notions about religious experiences in which the Holy Spirit is central make us all out to be mystics, with no time or interest in tough-minded analysis of ideas or careful communication of them.

We do confess a sense of the Divine Presence, and acknowledge feelings of peace and wholeness at a level deeper than our minds can grasp and more profound than our words can convey. Yet what we experience at these levels is in no way a denial of intellect but a confirmation of its worth in the sight of the Lord. Earnest Christians seek in gatherings like this to speak to one another -- to speak the truth in love. And such speaking, in this more or less scholarly setting, does not at all contradict the kind of communication we aim at in prayer and praise groups, in church services, or in witnessing to those not yet converted by the gospel. We have learned from Paul that our love is to abound more and more in knowledge and in true discrimination, that we may approve things that are excellent. The grace of God has appeared, teaching us.

My address this evening comes at the hour which the society at previous gatherings has assigned to scholars who stand outside the charismatic movement. Perhaps somewhat different from my predecessors, however, I am an evangelical believer. I am a Nazarene, and thus in the faith-tradition of the Wesleyan holiness movement to which many in the classic Pentecostal denominations in America have long felt themselves akin. Moreover, I think that Maximin Piette, a Roman Catholic scholar, interpreted John Wesley's thought soundly when he said that the founder of Methodism combined the Protestant ethic of grace with the Catholic ethic of holiness.

Let me, then, state at the outset what I think are my basic preconceptions about the charismatic movement, hoping that in personal openness I may speak the truth, and praying it will be received in love.

First, back of all I say lies the conviction that charismatic and Pentecostal Christians are my brothers and sisters in Christ. Vast numbers of you and those whom you represent enjoy not only through the Holy Spirit a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, having been born again, but also experience, I believe, the continuous inner cleansing called entire sanctification, which most Pentecostals relate in one way or another to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Although like we radical Wesleyans, you may sometimes have stressed the crisis experience of that baptism more than you have the discipleship which it dictates and sustains, Pentecostal Christians the world over these days are indeed cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in their lives "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." Some of us Wesleyans are, as we all ought to be, ashamed that we have been so slow to notice.

Second, basic to all of my relationships both brotherly and scholarly with the Pentecostal movement is my belief that the manifestation and propagation among them of what is called the unknown tongue, or glossolalia, is a confusing mistake, grounded in a misunderstanding of the Scriptures. The fact that this experience has persisted and spread among such loving and Christlike believers, however, shows that it is rooted in some of the deepest realities of individual and corporate religious quest. Speaking or praying in an unknown tongue is not, therefore, something I can in good conscience ignore, scorn, or routinely condemn. On the contrary, I must honestly respect it even while convinced that in a broadly biblical perspective the exercise constitutes a mistaken bypath, not the main road.

Finally, far more important to me than any dialogue over glossolalia or other "gifts of the Spirit" is a fundamental notion about biblical theology, namely, that its distinguishing mark, when compared with all other systems of religious belief, is its reasonableness and intelligibility -- its aim that we understand. At the heart of all the Bible tells us about the revelation of God to men and women and at the heart of all the witness of Spirit-anointed Christians to their fellows is a cognitive experience which captures the whole person.

The truth which is in Jesus comes to us in love, not to obscure its contours but, rather, to make them clear and comprehensible. It consists of more than propositions about God, but it includes them and requires those who receive that truth to do a lot of careful thinking about them. Indeed, I believe that the truth which seizes men and women in the gospel -- in the story of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ the Lord -- reveals so profoundly the faithfulness of the God of eternity that they do not need any additional miraculous attestation, whether by glossolalia or other spiritual gifts, to be convinced of His readiness to forgive their sins and fill their hearts with His Spirit. As at Sinai, so at Calvary and Pentecost, grace calls us to holiness-to loving God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.

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02 -- PART

Now, because confused or veiled communication has been so persistent among noncharismatic Wesleyans like me and Pentecostal Christians like you, I think it a good idea to let these three preconceptions, which would inevitably underlie any form in which I might order my thoughts, serve as the outline of my statements to you. Let me then explain and briefly illustrate each one of them on just as clear biblical, historical, and rational grounds as I can. And let me do it, please God, in that loving faithfulness which both the Old and New Testaments declare to be the righteousness which defines the character of a Christian.

I shan't linger long over the first of these presuppositions, the affirmative one, lest you be tempted to think me using that guile which the Apostle Paul forbids. My purpose is not through flattery on this one to soften your resistance to the other two. It is rather to state plainly, in this public way, a confession, and to apologize for the harshness with which many Wesleyans have greeted the charismatic awakening. Since the best way to affirm the thoroughness of one's repentance is to practice it, let me affirm some things I believe about the spiritual movement which has brought so many of you by faith in Christ to this place in your pilgrimage.

It seems obvious to me that the Pentecostal-charismatic movement has helped renew modern Christendom's understanding of the Holy Spirit's hallowing presence and work in the world. The movement is not, of course, entirely responsible for this renewal. Others have also proclaimed faithfully from the Scriptures the teaching that God is present with us through the Spirit of the risen Lord, a conception which differs radically from the doctrine of divine immanence which nineteenth-century liberals borrowed from German idealism. But charismatic Christians have been uniquely effective in awakening both popular and scholarly understanding of the Holy Spirit's mighty work in the church and society, as well as in personal life,

The Pentecostal revival has also helped reestablish the corporate character of salvation, in a day when persons outside the evangelical camp have assumed that those who emphasize spiritual experience are, inevitably, individualists. The prayer meetings, the house churches, the deep personal sharing of conflicts and victories in the Christian pilgrimage, as well as communal public prayer, even when the last eventuates in what I believe is the mistaken but reverently shared experience of speaking in unknown tongues, have all affirmed that a community of believers is in some wonderful sense truly the body of Christ on earth. We who are members of Him are also, by that fact, members of one another.

Furthermore, the charismatic awakening has also helped renew the sense of the miraculous among Christians of many traditions. Your leaders have demonstrated that God intervenes, not only to baptize His children with His Spirit, but to bless them in physical and temporal ways as well. To be sure, the current fascination with the miraculous, particularly in physical healing, in my opinion partly reflects the secular man's loss of faith in eternal life and his consequent preoccupation with extending this mortal one. And the unknown tongue seems to me more attractive because it promises every man his own miracle. Nevertheless, preaching and belief about both healing and the gift of tongues have helped to reinforce the idea that God does intervene miraculously in the natural world.

Pentecostals are also helping to rescue modern evangelicalism from its growing preoccupation with the sacredness of the particular words of Scripture, as distinct from their meaning and power. I suppose that most charismatics, if asked, would affirm they believe in the literal inerrancy of the words of Scripture, and not simply in the divine inspiration of the messages which the words convey. But I think their response would reflect more the Biblicism which prevails in evangelical culture than what your preachers have actually taught. For Pentecostal faith declares that the Spirit of God has broken through into the hearts of Christians, releasing them from the narrow bondage of merely sacramental or rational or fundamentalist dogmas and filling them with divine life. The biblical teaching of such a baptism of the Spirit sets the mood for a renewal of the moral understanding of the authority of Scripture. The Bible reveals Christ to us, and it leads us in the way of fellowship with Him. In the baptism of the Spirit, the promise of God to write His law on our hearts comes true.

Finally, charismatic Christians have helped to bring multitudes of people to what they are confident is a personal relationship with Christ. You have done this not so much through your teachings concerning the gifts of the Spirit, I think, as through the simple sharing of "the gospel in the power of the Spirit. Pentecost made real to the apostles the good news of the Incarnation, the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and the hope of everlasting life. The living Holy Spirit made these teachings real for the first converts as well. When they greeted one another long ago with the words "Christ is risen," their confidence rested not only in the testimony of the apostles who had seen Him, but on His presence in their own lives.

"When He is come," Jesus said of the Comforter, "He will convince the world." He did, and in your witness today, He does.

These affirmations to you, my brothers and sisters, lie back of my sincere prayer that we all may acknowledge one another in faith as children of God. Jesus Christ is Lord. The whole Church is His. You are His. I am His. We must, therefore, seek that unity of mind and feeling which the apostle urged upon the church of the Philippians, however great some of our differences of view may seem just now.

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03 -- PART

Turning then to my second conviction, I want to ask you to try to listen as I state why I think the experience and the cultivation of glossolalia among you is a mistake, rooted in a misunderstanding of the Scriptures. I cannot do this properly without explaining also why I think that experience became an important aspect of the spiritual life of Bible-believing twentieth-century Christians.

Let me begin with a brief account of my understanding of the scriptural passages which Pentecostals use to validate the gift of the unknown tongue. My purpose is not to prove but to summarize an alternative interpretation, portions of which you and some modern writers of biblical commentaries who are not themselves charismatics have forgotten were once common. Before the present century almost no critical commentary on the Scriptures understood the New Testament references to "other" or "unknown" tongues to refer to anything beyond what was both in the original Greek and in the English of King James's time. Their interpretation was that "tongues" meant simply "languages" -- languages which were spoken and understood somewhere on earth. My own contribution to the discussion reflects simply the turn of mind of an historian, reverently and critically trying to understand what the texts say happened.

What they say to me is that the gift of languages Paul dealt with in his letter to the Corinthians was not the same at all as the one recorded at Pentecost. There, so I read it, the miracle was the gift of what scholars call technically xenolalia: the ability for one glorious moment to speak not an unknown, but a well-known human tongue which the speakers had not learned or used before. The gift seems to have been distributed among at least as many different disciples as the number of national languages recorded in Acts, chapter 2.

The miracle was not, in fact, necessary to make possible communication with the hearers. The crowd drawn together outside the Upper Room by the apostles' joyous witnessing to the Resurrection consisted of Jews from every nation around the eastern Mediterranean, perhaps most of them businessmen or pilgrims visiting the Holy City. No doubt virtually all of them were fluent in one or the other of the languages current among the Jewish Christians: Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic. For

one or the other of these was the language of their homes and hearthsides, of their synagogues and business associations, in the cities to which they were scattered: Alexandria, Ephesus, Antioch, Rome, or wherever. The miracle was that they heard the apostles speaking in the Gentile languages of the peoples among whom they lived as expatriates.

The meaning of the gift of languages at Pentecost was, therefore, quite clear: the gospel was for all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike. There is no evidence in the text that the apostles were aware they were speaking in these other languages, and none that they felt themselves in a mind-altering ecstasy which prompted them to speak without knowing what they were saying. Their ecstasy was, rather, consistent with a keen self-awareness.

Moreover, as soon as the first burst of joyous witnessing had settled down, Peter rose to preach, presumably in Koine Greek, or possibly Aramaic-languages which all or nearly all who were present could understand. What Peter declared was the unity of the old and new covenants, and the fulfillment of God's promise to the prophets Joel and Jeremiah in the completed work of Christ Jesus. The outpouring of His Spirit attested the Resurrection and so gave redemptive meaning to His birth and life and death. All men, therefore, might repent and believe the gospel and receive the same Holy Spirit into their hearts.

In this further sense also, then, the miracle at Pentecost was the gift of a well-known language -- the rhetoric of enacted love. Jesus had spoken compassionately to Samaritan, Jew, and Roman soldier alike. In Him, Paul said, there is neither bond nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female, for Christ is all and in all. This kind of "language" the modern charismatic movement also truly speaks, in Detroit and San Antonio, in Guayaquil and Johannesburg. My brothers and sisters, the word is love. In the beginning was this Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He came, and we beheld His glory, full of grace and truth.

My understanding of the subsequent miracles of a gift of tongues described in the Book of the Acts is that they were precisely the same as that at Pentecost, and for the same purpose -- to declare to the church at epochal moments in their ministry to the Gentiles that their field was the whole world, and that all Christians are created equal. At the house of Cornelius, the miracle took place midway through Peter's clear and persuasive sermon, which he was likely preaching in Aramaic. Though it might have been translated into Greek or even Latin for some of the hearers, no suggestion of that lies in the text. But it is implied that when the Holy Spirit fell upon them, believers bore witness to it in all the languages known to those who were present.

So it was among the bilingual Jews whom Paul found at Ephesus, and to whom he must have spoken either Hebrew or Greek or both. They, too, spoke as the disciples had at Pentecost -- in languages they had not learned but which the various ethnic groups who had migrated to that great commercial city used in their

homes. The gift enabled the church at Ephesus also to understand that the gospel was intended for the Gentiles, that the atonement was for all mankind. Here, as at Cornelius' house, the miracle of communication celebrated understanding, not mystery. The grace of God and the Shalom in Jesus which Paul announced, were evident in the miraculous character of the love which the apostle displayed as he declared the whole counsel of the Lord.

In all these cases described in the Book of the Acts, the miracle had a dispensational, a covenantal meaning: to help Jews who dared to believe that Jesus was their Messiah realize that ethnic Jewishness was no means of salvation at all. Their own prophets had plainly taught that only a remnant would be saved, and they by grace, through faith which was the gift of God. Again and again in his letters, Paul spelled out what Jesus meant when He told the Samaritan woman that the day was at hand when neither in the mountain nearby nor in Jerusalem would men worship the Lord, but in spirit and in truth, wherever they were.

The obsession of modern evangelicals with the recent history of the Jews has kept us from clearly understanding the New Testament teachings about God's chosen people as well as the meaning of the miracle of languages at Pentecost. The miracle was not to provide power to communicate the gospel -- the Holy Spirit provided that -- but to symbolize the fact that those who did communicate it must go into all the world, and invite all men, of all colors and nations, to faith and brotherhood in Jesus Christ.

Only in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, does Paul designate the continuing ability to use other languages besides one's mother tongue as a "gift." It appears in connection with his discussion of the unity of the body of Christ, beginning in chapter 12. The apostle affirms that in the community of believers, the Holy Spirit blesses, empowers, and extends each member's natural talents. Since both natural and imparted abilities are in Paul's view gifts from God, he calls the resulting capacities to preach, prophesy, administer, teach, heal, and speak or interpret other than one's own language all gifts of the Spirit. The grace involved in these gifts -- the miraculous element in them -- consisted, I think, in a supernatural empowerment of native or developed abilities.

This interpretation parallels the way in which Paul describes the gift of salvation itself. Without the divine initiative, without the atonement, without what Wesley called God's "prevenient grace," no one would be able to respond to Him. Regeneration and sanctification begin when the truth of God's love in Christ, declared by the apostles, inscribed in the New Testament, and affirmed by their successors in all ages, persuades a sinner to repent and be saved. The same truth and love leads Christians into a fully consecrated life. Thus in Philippians, chapter 2, Paul explains that Christ identified himself with our humanity in order to show us that by His grace we can choose to do right, to be servants like Jesus, and to give ourselves in love. By such loving obedience, he wrote, we are to work out our

salvation with fear and trembling, resting in the confidence that God's Holy Spirit is working in us that we might both will and do His good pleasure.

So, in the Corinthian letter and elsewhere, I think, spiritual gifts are not simply God's work, but ours as well. The gift of languages was the power, whether by training or by the miracle called "xenolalia," to declare or interpret gospel truth in one or more human tongues besides one's own. When illuminated by the Holy Spirit, this gift made one able, like Paul, to speak that truth with such love as both to bring his hearers to faith in Jesus Christ and to nurture and confirm them in that faith.

Now why was this gift especially important in Corinth? Largely, I believe, because it was a rapidly growing commercial city whose residents spoke many different languages and in which Christianity was winning perhaps more converts among the numerous ethnic subgroups in the town than among the native-born Greeks. Paul had earnestly proclaimed to the people of Corinth the universality of the gospel, no doubt exercising often his gifts as a linguist, speaking their numerous mother tongues. Through the Holy Spirit's anointing of his speech, many people besides Greeks and Hellenized Jews joined the community of believers.

Many of the converts, however, found the Greek which was generally spoken in Corinth, and hence in Christian gatherings, difficult to use. The members gifted in interpretation, therefore, were priceless. Little wonder, then, that a problem should have risen from the frequent use in their meetings of languages unknown to most of those present.

My own reconstruction of what the text implies happened runs like this: When new converts of non-Greek backgrounds found themselves struggling to phrase their prayers in Greek, or to express their testimonies or celebrate their joy in that tongue, they often lapsed back into speaking their native language, not waiting for an interpreter. A natural and loving response among the congregation was to say to a brother or a sister, "I did not understand what you said, but I know the Spirit in whose power I sensed you were speaking and He teaches us all. Peace!" A difference of opinion then arose as to whether an interpreter or, indeed, any spiritual gift of languages was really necessary, since Jesus had promised that the Spirit himself would guide Christians into all truth.

That difference of opinion Paul dealt with firmly in chapter 14. He explained that although one might communicate some of his spiritual experience in a nonverbal way while speaking or praying in a language his hearers did not understand, this did not edify the church very much. The building up of the Christian community depended upon the daily increase of their comprehension of the gospel. The truth revealed in the life and death and life again of Jesus Christ is good news to be understood, not simply felt--a constellation of ideas to be believed, shared, and, if need be, defended.

Speaking in an unknown tongue without an interpreter, Paul wrote, and especially doing so without waiting upon one another turn by turn, produced confusion and reversed the work of Pentecost. It gave no witness to unsaved hearers and certainly did not teach the church anything, even though in private prayers or in conversations or prayers with one's family or others who understood it, one's native language was often better.

"For if I pray in an [unknown] tongue," Paul wrote in verse 14, "my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful." Forcing that verse and the preceding ones to refer to glossolalia -- that is, to speaking in any language whose meanings were not known either to the speaker or to his hearers -- requires one of the foremost modern scholars, Hans Conzelmann, to substitute the translation "empty" for the Greek word correctly translated in the King James "unfruitful." No justification exists for the alternative translation, either in the Greek language or in the personality or character of Paul. He never approved doing or saying anything in Christ's name with an empty head.

Concerning the second verse of the chapter, Conzelmann himself affirms (in 1 Corinthians, a Commentary, tr. James W. Leitch [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974], p. 234) Paul made clear that Christians speaking in tongues do know what they are saying, in contradiction of the supposed Greek example of the priestess of Delphi who, crazed by gases from her hillside cave, didn't know what she said. Indeed, verses 2 and 14 are parallels and require no forcing at all if one understands them to mean simply that when praying aloud in a language the speaker alone among the congregation understood well, his mind, his understanding bore no fruit in the minds of his brothers and sisters, however edifying the prayer may have been to him in both mind and spirit.* [*The foregoing two paragraphs did not appear in the original address.]

Whether in respect to the gift of languages or others, then, Paul wants the Christians in Corinth to remember that all gifts are for the community, none for the individual. He had just told them, by way of history's most moving hymn, that no gift was worth anything at all to one who possessed or used it without the empowerment of perfect love. Language, whether earthly or heavenly, was for caring--and so were sacrifice, prophecy, service, preaching, and all the rest. Love was indeed the divine element in all spiritual gifts -- the essence of holiness. In its power, everyone could prophesy -- that is, everyone could declare the faithfulness of God in such a way as to convert sinners and edify the church, even if he could do so only in his native language.

Moreover, in both the Pentecost and Corinthian stories, Christian joy -- what I would call rational ecstasy -- is clearly a central aspect of both a convert's experience of the Holy Spirit's baptism, and his sharing with others the good news of that experience and of the larger gospel it confirms. In these and all other cases in the New Testament, such ecstasy as Christians know stems from clarity of

perception; their joy, from understanding. The message that God was in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world to himself, brings gladness.

Modern glossolalia seems to me to depart in significant ways from this biblical experience of joy-of an ecstasy which consists in understanding Christ's promise of wholeness and the meaning of grace and peace. In both Old and New Testaments, when ecstasy and utterance were joined, the resulting prophecy did not deal with the mystery of things which were not understood, but with the wonder of things which were.

My good friend Charles Isbell, an Old Testament scholar trained under Cyrus Gordon and recently a member of the faculty at the University of Massachusetts, has explored both the biblical and nonbiblical texts dealing with incidents of prophetic ecstasy which seemed to involve an altered state of consciousness. Some of these texts have recently been interpreted to affirm the practice in the ancient Near East of ecstatic utterance not unlike modern glossolalia. In the nonbiblical materials (which have multiplied as a result of modern archaeology) as well as in the biblical ones, Isbell found no example of such ecstasy associated with speech. Its manifestation was, rather, in other forms of observable behavior, as in the case of the ecstasy which overcame Saul when, just after Samuel had anointed him to be king in Israel, he encountered a company of prophets of dubious inspiration, stripped himself naked, and lay among them in a trance all day.

Another friend, James Copple, who is a specialist in the Early Church Fathers, followed my recent suggestion and reread the original documents pertaining to the Donatist and Montanist heresies. Some modern scholars have believed these recorded early experiences of glossolalia. Copple, who is a whiz at Latin, of course, and a Ph.D. candidate at Boston College, reported they contain no precise description of utterance similar to glossolalia at all. There were trances, visions, occasional miracles of healing, and a few apparent references to xenolalia (the ability to speak or interpret one of the known human languages) but no "unknown tongue," either in private prayer or in public witness. This and other reading I have meanwhile done have convinced me that it is now proper for an historian to doubt whether speaking in unknown tongues, as Pentecostal Christians generally do today, ever occurred in religious settings in the ancient East or in the church of the first three centuries.

Let me repeat that the Bible refers again and again to the overwhelming joy which came to both prophets and apostles when they heard the word of the Lord. The prophets, however, recorded God's Word -- so the texts we have affirm -- as poetry. Was not this poetry the work of human minds illuminated by the Spirit of God? The prophets struggled to understand and declare what they had heard, it seems to me, when neither they nor the people to whom they spoke had yet seen its meaning fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

As for the apostles, Peter said at Pentecost, and Paul wrote to the Colossians, that the Holy Spirit's baptism, and the presence of the risen Lord in the hearts of His disciples, affirmed the incarnation of God in Christ, and so made manifest the secrets of the ages. God himself had spoken the truth in love, bringing wholeness of understanding to those who followed Moses and the prophets. And that same, loving truth would melt stony Gentile hearts as well as enable them by faith to cast aside their former attachments and love the Lord with all their hearts and minds.

* * * * *

04 -- PART

If the foregoing interpretations of biblical materials make sense, they leave still unexplained the persisting acceptance of the contrary understanding of the Scriptures which charismatic Christians have developed in the twentieth century. Does that understanding not stem from the central place which ecstatic utterance has occupied in modern Pentecostal experience? And does the latter not, in turn, rest upon some very deep continuities between the renewed quest of modern Christians for God's fullness and the phenomenon of glossolalia? Grant that a seeker usually observes speaking in tongues in others before he experiences it himself. Nevertheless, the life and testimony of those others must have been in his view so convincingly Christian that he wanted to emulate them. Moreover, his own burst into glossolalia, if I have heard modern Pentecostal testimonies right, was bound up with a profound experience of consecration, of openness, of wonder before the will of God.

The same spiritual and psychic realities must have confirmed the authenticity of glossolalia in the beginnings of the twentieth-century Pentecostal movement. Although scholars tend to identify that event with the awakening at Topeka, Kansas, in 1900-1901, earlier incidents of unknown tongues also seem to have taken place among people whose earnestness their critics could not refute. These would include Quakers in England and Shakers in the United States in the eighteenth century; and in the nineteenth century, Irvingites in England, a tiny "Reconstructionist" community in Massachusetts, and, apparently, some of the most spiritual Mormons. Their history suggests that a loosening of the constraints which learning a language and using it properly impose upon the human impulse to speak sometimes accompanies a spiritual breakthrough to faith and freedom, even in the absence of preaching or teaching about glossolalia. Shouting, in Protestant revivalist culture, is a comparable exercise, as was the hesychast prayer among twelfth-century Eastern Orthodox monks.

I think the deeper cultural and religious meanings of glossolalia which help account for its appeal are not to be dismissed lightly or scornfully, therefore, even by those of us who think the experience diverts Christians from the biblical way. Let

me set forth here, before some persons who know much more about these things than I, do, a Wesleyan scholar's appreciation of these deeper meanings.

First, the attractiveness of glossolalia today seems to me to rest upon the long association of religious faith with mystery. Biblical truth, however, came to those who received it -- from Cain and Abel forward through Noah and Abraham to Jeremiah and the later prophets, in the form of an unveiling of mystery. God revealed His faithfulness in a moment of crisis produced by the faithlessness of humankind, the caprice of nature, or the frustration of strong psychic impulses. The Book of Job especially speaks to the human suffering which stems from the mysterious conflict of good and evil in the universe and in our lives.

All the great world religions traffic in that mystery. But Job, like all the Old Testament Scriptures, affirmed in both theology and ethics a God who shows His love to His people and who wants them to think His kind of thoughts, despite the pain and confusion which accompany the life of faith. Moses renounced witchcraft, sorcery, and divination, and the prophets called Israel to reason. "Come now and let us reason together, says the Lord," Isaiah cried; and Micah asked, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?" Likewise we discover a Suffering Saviour and learn Christian duty from Paul, who never minced words about the incompleteness of his knowledge, his dismay at injustice, and the anguish which threats to his life and ministry constantly posed.

Roman Catholic worship and the more liturgical forms of Protestant worship have always allowed much room for this sense of awe before the mysteries of time and eternity. Indeed, the long unwillingness of the Roman Catholic church to conduct its services in the language of the communicants created a tradition in which people felt or were supposed to feel closest to God at times when they did not understand a word of what was being said. The opposite extreme characterized Protestantism. Puritan pastors sought by plainness of speech to drive all mystery out of worship, and Scottish realists insisted that biblical truth made common sense. Later on, some American revivalists made the gospel out to be so simple that it caricatured life. Both kinds of Protestants created a hunger for some way to symbolize, if not to affirm, the mysteries of eternity before which Christians stand in both awe and hope.

In this context, it is no wonder to me that the spiritual awakening in Latin America, where generations of Christians were taught to experience religious feeling amidst the Latin mass, should have resulted in an immense flowering of speaking in unknown tongues. In Africa likewise, pre-Christian religious feeling was associated not only with fear of evil forces, but with many varieties of linguistic mystery as well. In Indian and other Oriental religions, the cultivation of awe and silence left a large place for speech, as the Hare Krishna chant and the incantation of one's secret mantra in Transcendental Meditation make plain. Ecstatic utterance, in a language known or unknown, has seemed in these cultures as well as our own to be an attractive way to counter the enchainment of the human spirit to the dark

walls of mystery and futility which have imprisoned modern no less than primitive man.

At a different cultural level, the generation which witnessed in the 1920s the first great flowering of tongues-speaking in evangelical revivals from Los Angeles to Oslo, heard strange sounds also from some of the younger poets, who fell into deep despair at the desolation which World War I and its aftermath had brought to the human spirit. Called dadaists, these poets linked together syllables in the form of words, and "words" into "sentences" which had no more meaning than the beating of tom-toms. The poems seemed to their authors, however, fitting odes to pain and darkness. Meanwhile, young painters of the surrealist, abstract expressionist, and dadaist schools echoed the poets' anguish. T. S. Eliot, in a thoughtful commentary on these artistic developments, confessed that he shared the dadaist sense of frustration but believed the task of the poet was not to celebrate the darkness but to help find the way out of it.

Is it not, in fact, possible that the emphasis upon speaking in unknown tongues reflects more this human condition than the divine remedy--that it is excess spiritual baggage, imposed upon our faith more by the confusions of modern culture than by the gladness of Christian joy?

Critics have suggested another psychic interpretation of glossolalia, namely, that it constitutes an impulse of believers to return to the language of infancy. If there is any truth to this seemingly shallow observation, a generation of Christians who have learned to appreciate some of the general insights of psychoanalysis, as well as to discriminate among its odd and special implications, ought not to scorn it. In quest of a faith in God which can deal truly with the realities of our broken and darkened lives, we come through grace to discover our own sin and to realize its broad consequences.

When we realize that the Christian way to deal with guilt is, as Jesus said, to become as a trusting child, the impulse to cry like a baby -- resting in the unfolding care of God's everlasting arms, or "leaning on Jesus," as several gospel folk songs put it -- seems often to be an authentic and biblical aspect of one's spiritual healing. If, indeed, then, the experience of speaking in unknown tongues consists in any part of infantile babbling made into a liturgical event, the emotional and psychic realities involved would not differ much from those which generations of Roman Catholics have felt toward the blessed mother, in whose compassion and tenderness they sought healing for their hurts.

Another interpretation reflects the fact that glossolalia has in the last decades become more important in the "language" of prayer than of testimony or praise. Now, the biblical view of prayer is that God talks with us and we talk with Him. With a startling directness, and without any sense that the event should be explained, the Old Testament describes God talking with Abraham, and Abraham

talking to God in response; so with Moses and the prophets, so with John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul.

Yet, quite clearly, prayer in both Old and New Testaments is more than intelligible communication; it is communion. Moses talks with God at the burning bush, but the first subject of the conversation has to do with reverence--taking off his shoes. By the time he gets back to that mountain some years later, leading the children of Israel in his train, his talk with God has reached the most profound levels of communion, and involves revelations of divine glory imparted not only by words but by radiance. So with Jesus when in prayer He was transfigured before the eyes of three disciples. Another of our Lord's prayers, that at Gethsemane, represented much more than could be conveyed by the words in which, profoundly enough, He affirmed His dedication at the cost of a cross.

Prayer, then, however verbalized, takes Christians at their deeper moments of spiritual crisis to the limits of their comprehension. Paul knew well the loneliness of unphraseable prayers. In those hours when we don't know what or how to pray, he wrote to the Romans, "The Holy Spirit helps our infirmities, making intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" -- groanings whose meaning and means of relief the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ understands. Charismatic Christians are not illogical to wish to break through these limitations to prayer in an utterance of syllables which stand for things which no earthly language can say.

But I believe Paul was showing the Romans, and us, a better way. When our prayers have reached the limit of our understanding, we are to wait in faith and listen before the Lord. For the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us in such moments with a clarity that need not be confused by our moving lips and singing voices, and with a love from which nothing is able to separate us -- neither life nor death, principalities nor powers. Praying in an unknown tongue at that point, I think, may sometimes divert our attention from the awesome communion we ought to have with a suffering Saviour, disconnecting our minds at the very moment when we ought to be listening most intently for what God has to say to us.

The final aspect I will mention concerning the attractiveness of glossolalia in our time is its symbolic renunciation of the pride of intellect which is the curse of so much of modern Christianity. Such pride was not born yesterday. The endless dogmatic debates and the petty hairsplitting which characterized theological dialogue for centuries reached a climax in the late eighteenth century. The contrary manifestation of pride in nineteenth-century evangelicalism was, rather, optimism: a dream of the future which replaced the four horsemen of the Apocalypse with four other benevolent ones, Christianity, science, education, and democracy. These four, the nineteenth-century revivalists believed, were pulling the chariot of human history toward the millennium.

Such hopes were not to be fulfilled. And they appeared less and less substantial as they came more and more to rest upon human will and intellect standing uncrucified before the Lord. The events of the twentieth century have chastened science and exposed the shallowness of our democracy. But pride still rules. Men strive to resolve the problem of world hunger through agro-economics and political innovation, and deal with the agony of death in legal battles over who may pull the plug and allow the human heart to stop its beating. Without accepting all of the apocalyptic utterances of the Club of Rome, Christians may rejoice in any religious exercise which exposes the obscenity of such pride.

But Judaism and Christianity have not ever celebrated ignorance in order to humble man and glorify God. Rather they have inspired thought and challenged mankind to intellectual and moral struggle. Both Moses and Jesus declared that when we really listen to our God, what we hear is the ancient shema of Deuteronomy: a call to love Him with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.

My mother was a holiness preacher and my father was both that and a professor of philosophy. In the midst of some of those long discussions of religious and philosophical issues which my dad, when he was feeling well, shared with my brothers and sisters around the family table, Mother would say, with a faint smile, "Remember, children, the wisdom of man [nodding just then slightly toward my father] is foolishness with God." We laughed. But we understood that she did not mean by those remarks either to put Dad down or to disdain the immense tradition of Christian search for understanding which his study represented. She meant rather to say that the glories of God's truth would always lie so far beyond man's ability to encompass them that He would ever be the Lord.

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05 -- PART

This brings me to the third of my central presuppositions, and perhaps makes it easy for me to deal with it briefly. I think the central theme of the Book we call the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New, is its clarity and reasonableness--its intention that we understand. The God who asks us to speak the truth in love is telling us to address the world in the same way He addresses us. Jesus, John's Gospel declares, is the Word; and the Word of truth is love. The Incarnation was the climax of those mighty acts of God in history by which the divine Word, revealed in Jesus' deeds of ultimate faithfulness, becomes Truth to us. Being, saying, and doing are, with the blessed Trinity, all one. God could not reveal His being to us except that He should speak -- and act in harmony with His speaking.

"Son of man," the Lord said to Ezekiel, "stand upon thy feet and I will speak to thee." No groveling in the dust before Jehovah; that's for the pagan idols. He is the Lord, your Father, the Shepherd of your lost and wandering soul. "Hear, O

Israel," Jehovah said through Moses -- and the verb is a powerful one (attend, listen, with a will not only to understand but to act upon what you hear) -- "Hear, O Israel, your Lord alone is God; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength." Loving is not just feeling, nor is knowing simply understanding. Both of them require a trust which acts. In the Bible, law is life, and holiness mostly loving. Christians are to do the truth.

Throughout the Scriptures this view of truth is embroidered on the circle of the sunrise. Hosea pronounces Israel accursed because she does not know God. Isaiah hopes for the day of redemption when the knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth and sea and sky. Jehovah interrupts Jeremiah's mourning with the assurance that He will make a new covenant with the believing and trusting remnant, and write His law on their hearts. This promise Joel affirmed, and Zechariah announced its impending fulfillment at the birth of John the Baptist. The Apostle Peter made his prophecy the text of his Pentecost sermon -- "This is that."

Jesus confessed His vocation in the synagogue in Nazareth with the word "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for He has anointed me to preach." Paul testified he was not ashamed of the gospel -- the good news, the story of Jesus, the truth of His incarnation, His deeds and words, His death and resurrection. That good news, shared in the power of the Spirit so as to be understood and believed, was the power of God which could change men's lives and make wrongs right. Little wonder that in its opening hymn to the Saviour John's Gospel declared in awe, "We beheld his glory... full of grace and truth."

All these New Testament statements tell us that the Church of Pentecost did indeed listen to the apostles' doctrine, as well as share their fellowship, break bread together, and pray. The apostles made the story of Jesus Christ the center of their witness, sure that it spoke in clear and understandable terms of the redeeming love of God. Paul, as one of them born out of time, so steeped himself in their teachings that the Jesus whom the four Evangelists portrayed stood at the center of every passage he wrote.

Recent biblical scholarship has thrust aside an earlier generation's skepticism and laid bare the massive unity of the teaching of Jesus which appears in Paul and Peter, John and James, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Jude. All of them understood the Old Testament in the way that Jesus taught His disciples: the Torah was not so much a book of rules as a revelation of God's faithfulness and His love. It set forth truth which, understood and received into mind and heart and set aflame by God's Spirit, made sinners holy. Don't dabble with the mysteries which men of pride and presumptuous learning seek to impose upon you, Paul wrote the Colossians; for the mysteries of the ages are now all made clear in the story of a babe born in Bethlehem and of a Son, dead at Calvary but risen from the grave.

Little wonder that the great texts by which Paul brought to climactic intensity the message of each of his letters stress so much the intellect. The one he wrote to

the Romans, which began with the words I have already quoted -- "The gospel . . . is the power of God unto salvation" -- pivots on the mighty passage beginning in chapter 11 and verse 33, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" The appeal of Philippians 2:5, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus," echoes that Epistle's central theme, that the love of Christ illuminates the intellect. First Corinthians 14:15, a commentary upon the hymn of love in the preceding chapter, declares Paul's apostolate of sanctified thinking: "I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also; I will sing with the Spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also."

It seems to me, my brothers and sisters, that if the experience of the unknown tongue is to be retained as a central feature of charismatic fellowship and witness, Pentecostal scholars face a challenge far greater than the important one of interpreting and reconciling particular texts in Acts and First Corinthians. The larger challenge is to explain to yourselves as well as to those others of us who love and serve the same Lord and believe our hearts claimed and cleansed by the baptism of the same Holy Spirit, how speaking in unknown tongues fits in with this central biblical theme of revelation -- of truth telling. Does the recurrent event, in fact, celebrate adequately your own experience of grace, in which the eternal God broke through into your consciousness, convicting you of your sin and convincing you of His faithfulness both to forgive and to cleanse it away? Did He not in that hour, as your lives have testified, call you with all Christians to think, to listen, to grow in the understanding of the Scriptures, and to preach the good news in such an intelligible way as to edify the Church? Does an experience of automatic speech, or the use of a "language" unknown to yourself or to anyone else around you, really serve as a proper symbol or a consistent testimony to what really has happened to you?

If, as I imagine, speaking in unknown tongues has sometimes proved as confusing within the ranks of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement as it has outside, that fact seems to me also to call urgently for a response to this larger challenge. With fear and trembling, but in confidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in us to will and to do God's will, let us study and pray together for an understanding of the truth and for the power to speak it in love.

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THE END