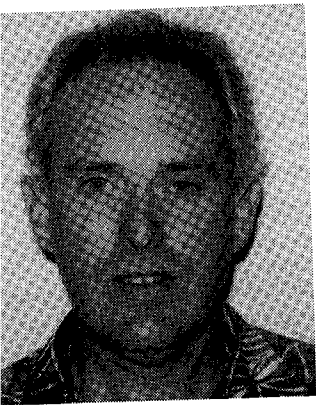




An Adventist Perspective on Tongues

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It hardly needs to be stated that many Adventists—certainly most Adventist ministers—feel uncomfortable in a Pentecostal worship service.¹ Just recently, with a Pentecostal family member, I attended a service in which I stolidly stood to sing while all of those around me were using their bodies as vehicles for praising God. I held back while others were "slain" in the Spirit, and I remained silent while everyone else spoke in "tongues."

What causes Seventh-day Adventists to treat with suspicion a movement that has become almost omnipresent in the Christian world? Is there, in fact, an Adventist position in regard to the most prominent sign of contemporary Pentecostalism: tongues? Given early Adventist involvement in some charismatic experiences,² it is perhaps surprising to find that there is so little agreement in regard to the tongues phenomenon, even on the biblical data. Certainly, unanimity is lacking relative to the exact kind of "tongues" that were being exercised in Corinth (1 Corinthians 12-14). In fact, the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* presents the two viable positions.

One is that "the language spoken under the influence of the gift was a foreign language," and the other, that "the manifestation was different from that on the day of Pentecost; that the language was not one spoken by men."

A Practical Approach?

This lack of agreement has often created an impasse to further discussion, even among Adventist Christians.³ For instance, it may be

argued that if we cannot agree on the kind of tongues being spoken in the Corinthian church, how can we ever concur in our approach to the Charismatic movement that takes 1 Corinthians 12-14 as its *raison d'être*?⁴ It may be that linguistic or behavioral studies of contemporary Pentecostal tongues-speaking⁵ and additional exegetical study of 1 Corinthians 12-14 could provide us with further answers to our questions. Yet, it seems to me that those who are already involved in glossolalia will be little-impressed with linguistic or behavioral studies in that they regard tongues-speaking as "transpsychical" or belonging "to the realm of the Spirit,"⁶ and hence outside of the sphere of empirical investigation. Further, citing a list of writers and commentators who take one particular stance⁷ resolves nothing when Christian believers know (or suspect) that a coterie of impressive scholars can be assembled to support the opposite case.

Therefore, this essay approaches the subject of tongues-speaking from a practical and pastoral standpoint. Rather than aiming to find out once and for all what is meant by Paul's use of the word "tongues" in 1

Corinthians 12-14, or the origin of contemporary glossolalia (whether divine, demonic, psychological etc), I will attempt to by-pass those issues in favour of a discussion of principles that should inform Adventist Christians as they come into contact with the issue of tongues, both inside and outside of the church.⁸

Finding Common Ground

It seems to me that little is to be gained by taking a confrontational stance in regard to charismatic manifestations. To argue that tongues-speaking has its origin in demon-possession or that Pentecostalism is in

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any sense sub-Christian is wrong-footed and constitutes nothing more or less than an *ad hominem* argument.⁹ Many Adventists are familiar with enough charismatic Christians—some are close family members—to suspect that accusations of satanic control are inappropriate descriptions of very dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ.

While some tongues-speakers themselves call into question such excesses of Pentecostalism as spiritual elitism, fanaticism and separatism,¹⁰ these constitute problems that regularly occur within non-Pentecostal congregations as well as charismatic fellowships. Certainly elitism, fanaticism and separatism were characteristic within the first-century Corinthian church,¹¹ yet Paul does not call into question the Christian commitment of the Corinthian believers. Instead, his instructions to them must be read in the context of his affirmation that they were “the church of God in Corinth, . . . those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.”¹² Surely, the same attitude is also necessary in the contemporary context as well.

The fact that Paul inserts his love hymn of 1 Corinthians 13 into the centre of his discussion of tongues-speaking in the Corinthian church is

significant in this context. It is clear that high claims of spiritual insight and giftedness are to be judged according to the fruit of the Spirit, love.¹³ At the very least, theological discussion should be carried out in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect.

Understanding Tongues in the Corinthian Context

Paul’s desire to bring unity to a divided church appears to be the immediate context for his first Epistle to the Corinthians. Some members of Chloe’s household had reported to him the “quarrels among you” (1 Corinthians 1:11).¹⁴ Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Paul’s discussion of questions related to “spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 12:1) is couched within a section in which he pleads for order in the place of disorder.¹⁵ After all, “God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33).

J. Massynbærde Ford points out that “the community aspect of the gift of tongues” is clearly evident in both Acts and 1 Corinthians.¹⁶ For example, Ford maintains that Luke’s description of Pentecost is intentionally framed “to appear as the reversal of the Tower of Babel.”¹⁷ In addition, in the light of Paul’s obvious concern for unity among the Corinthian believers, his practical instruction in regard to tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14 may have more relevance for the church today than questions such as whether the tongues spoken at Corinth were foreign languages or ecstatic utterances.

Paul is writing to a particular situation, and it may be impossible for us to completely reconstruct that context.¹⁸ In fact, one should not even conclude that Paul completely understood the nature of the tongues being spoken in Corinth.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Paul’s intention is clear. That is, he intends to provide the Corinthian Christians with practical guidelines that could be followed in order to resolve the chaotic worship situation in their congregation.

While it is possible that Paul believed that tongues could be used in a private situation of prayer to God, his instructions in 1 Corinthians 12-14 certainly have to do with public worship.²⁰ What is also clear is that Paul is writing to a church in which the gift of tongues is being abused. That is made

plain by the structure of his argument.²¹

Edification of the Church, Rather Than Self-edification

In 1 Corinthians, the exercise of the gift of tongues is to be viewed in relation to all the other gifts of the Spirit that have been bestowed on the church. All the gifts have been given for the “common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7) and therefore, in a very important sense, are gifts to the church rather than to individuals.²² This being the case, it should not be surprising that Paul seems to stress the gifts that are designed to edify the church rather than tongues that are being used (at least in the Corinthian situation) for self-edification.

Notice Paul’s counsel that while the believer is to “eagerly desire spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1), the gift of prophecy is of greater value in the church because “everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort,” whereas the person “who speaks in a tongue edifies himself” rather than the church (1 Corinthians 14:3, 4).²³ Paul reinforces this point with his remark that when believers “come together” everything—whether hymn, word of instruction, revelation, tongue, or interpretation—“must be done for the strengthening of the church” (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Tongues, Not for Every Member of the Body

It is clear from 1 Corinthians 12 that Paul does not believe that all of the Corinthian believers will speak in tongues. Rather, he indicates that “to

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each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). To one believer is given the gifts of healing, to another

er different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues, and so forth.²⁴ Indeed, the spiritual gifts are distributed by the Holy Spirit "just as he determines" (1 Corinthians 12:11), not according to

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the wishes of individual believers. All the gifts are necessary (1 Corinthians 12:14-26), but not all believers are apostles, prophets, teachers, or "speak in tongues" (1 Corinthians 12:29, 30).

Recently I was approached by a member of a charismatic congregation who was very concerned because she was unable to speak in tongues. The pastor, and other members of her church, had strongly suggested to her that anyone who had received the Holy Spirit should be able to speak in tongues. Such a conviction is not founded in the Pauline instructions to the church at Corinth. Paul gives no indication whatsoever that tongues, or any other particular spiritual gift for that matter, are to be used as a sign of commitment to Christ, reception of the Holy Spirit, or qualification for ministry. Instead, it seems clear that the ultimate sign of the Spirit-filled and spiritually gifted person is self-forgetful love (1 Corinthians 13).

Order in Worship, Not Disorder

Agape love is not only the basis of Christian unity, it produces order in the worship life of the body of Christ. As well as emphasising that every aspect of the church's worship services be designed for the edification of the members, Paul's instructions to the Corinthians include some

very specific directions regarding order in worship. These guidelines range from such issues as prophetic messages received during the worship service²⁵ to whether women should speak in the churches.²⁶

Specifically, in regard to tongues, these instructions required that only two—or at the most three—messages may be presented in a tongue. And, these were to be given "one at a time, and someone must interpret" (1 Corinthians 14:27). In fact, so strongly does Paul insist on an interpreter, that he admonishes, "If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God" (1 Corinthians 14:28).²⁷ It appears that the tongues-speaker is able to exercise self-control. He or she has the capacity or freedom to choose to speak or to be silent.

Speaking in Tongues, Not to Be Forbidden

Finally, Paul teaches that speaking in tongues is not to be forbidden. It should be noticed, however, that this command is given in the context of the edification of the whole body. It is significant, therefore, that Paul once again accentuates the gift of prophecy in his statement: "My brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:39).

While Paul does not prohibit speaking in tongues, he has, by his specific directions in 1 Corinthians 12-14, provided standards of worship behaviour that would curb the aberrations in the Corinthian church. In order to encourage the implementation of his counsel, Paul appeals to the reason of the believers in Corinth as well as to his own apostolic authority.²⁸

Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventists, along with many other Christians, find great difficulty in living with unresolved questions. There are some issues related to glossolalia that do not appear to be open to unequivocal answers. Personally, I believe that the question as to exactly what kind of tongues were being spoken in the Corinthian church is one of those issues. Does this conclusion leave us open to the problems of "charismania" such as fanaticism, elitism and separatism? Not necessarily. I believe

that if the Pauline counsel of 1 Corinthians 12-14 were followed by Adventist Christians as well as by charismatic Christians, not only would the excesses of contemporary Pentecostalism be avoided, but in addition the danger of barrenness in Christian living and worship would also be evaded.²⁹ Could it be that the divisiveness of the Corinthian church of the first century arose out of an obsession with spiritual gifts, while our personal and corporate apathy may be the result of excessive fear of spiritual gifts? Paul's balanced, pastoral counsel is valid in both cases.

Is a practical approach valid when exegetical and theological issues are at stake? While objections to a pragmatic strategy may be raised, it must be admitted that in this case Paul's basic methodology involves the practical rather than the theoretical. Of course, Paul does not ignore theological issues. Rather, his practical guidelines are firmly based in such doctrines as God's love, Christ's sacrifice,

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and the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Can we do better than to follow his example?

Finally, will Paul's guidelines work in contemporary congregational life? For example, how should the worship leaders in a congregation respond to tongues speaking during a church service? It seems to me that such Pauline principles as community edification, congregational order, as well as the corporate wisdom and discernment of the members of the church³⁰ are sufficient to address the issue whether the tongues being spoken are foreign languages or a private prayer language. □

**Bible quotations are from the New International Version.*

1. According to Peter Kaldor and others, *Winds of Change: The Experience of the Church in Changing Australia*, Lancer, Homebush West, NSW, 1994, 85 per cent of Seventh-day Adventists surveyed in the *National Church Life Survey* disapproved of

speaking in tongues (page 76). This was the highest disapproval rating of all the denominations surveyed.

2. See, for instance, Arthur L. White, "Charismatic Experiences in Early Seventh-day Adventist History" (reprinted from 12 articles published in the *Review* and *Herald*, August 10, 17, 24, 1972; March 15, 22, 29, 1973; and August 2, 9, 1973). For an application of our past history to the present ecclesial situation, consult George E. Rice, "Charismatic Experiences in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Present and Future" (paper from the Ellen G. White Estate, September 1990).

3. F. D. Nichol, ed, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington, DC, 1956, Vol 6, page 795*. A convenient summary of the two positions, with arguments for and against, can be had in Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, New International Commentary, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987, pages 597-8*. Compare also Gerhard F. Hasel, *Speaking in Tongues: Biblical Speaking in Tongues and Contemporary Glossolalia, Adventist Theological Society, Berrien Springs, Michigan, 1991, page 150*, and Ivan T. Blazen, "Andrews University on 1 Corinthians 14" (unpublished paper, available for study in the SDA Research Centre, Avondale College, nd).

4. Observe that Howard M. Ervin's chapter, "The Apostle Paul's Attitude Toward Tongues," in his classic apology for charismaticism, "These Are Not Drunken, as Ye Suppose," *Logos, Plainfield, New Jersey, 1968, pages 157-74*, appears as central to his argument.

5. See such seminal works as those by William J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism, Macmillan, New York, 1972*, and Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972*. For a brief discussion of the results of the contemporary linguistic study of glossolalia, consult Hasel, pages 27-31. A behavioural science view of tongues-speaking is available in H. Newton Malony and A. Adams Lovekin, *Glossolalia: Behavioural Science Perspectives on Speaking in Tongues, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985*.

6. J. R. Williams, "Charismatic Movement," in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed Walter A. Elwell, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984, page 207.

7. As Hasel does on page 163, n 169, in favour of the view that 1 Corinthians 12-14 refers to "foreign languages."

8. A valuable and convenient resource on many of the issues surrounding glossolalia is Watson E. Mills, ed, *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1986*. For a more recent bibliography, see Hasel, pages 165-73.

9. For example, Hasel maintains that tongues-speaking is suspect because it appears "within pagan ritual and practice, within the crafts of witch doctors, shamans, and priests of pagan religions" (Hasel, page 26). It should be observed that much of Christian ritual has its counterparts in non-Christian religions. Should all such activities as public prayer, hymn-singing, and the use of musical instruments in worship be called into question on the same basis?

10. See Clark H. Pinnock, *Three Keys to Spiritual Renewal: A Challenge to the Church, Bethany House, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1985, pages 54-5*. Note that Pinnock is a charismatic Baptist.

11. Notice, for example, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; 11:17-34; and 14:26-40.

12. 1 Corinthians 1:2, NIV.

13. Note, especially, 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal." Galatians 5:22, 23.

14. See also 1 Corinthians 3:1-23.

15. 1 Corinthians 14:40.

16. J. Massyngbaerde Ford, "Toward a Theology of 'Speaking in Tongues,'" in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia*, ed Watson E. Mills, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1986, page 289. Ford's chapter is a reprint from *Theological Studies* 32 (1971), pages 3-29.

17. *Ibid.* Observe that Ford bases this conclusion on the prior work of J. D. Davies, "Pentecost and Glossolalia," *Journal of Theological Studies* 3 (October 1952), pages 228-31, who has shown the verbal similarity between the LXX reading of Genesis 11 and the description of Pentecost in Acts 2 (Ford, pages 289-90). Ford also refers to M. D. Goulder, who has demonstrated the parallelisms between the nation lists of Genesis 10 and the people lists of Acts 2:8-11 (*ibid.*, page 290). See Goulder, *Type and History in Acts, London, 1964, pages 152-8*.

18. Such is certainly the case in regard to Paul's puzzling remarks about baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29).

19. Edward Heppenstall suggests that "it is quite possible that Paul had not yet come to understand the nature of this manifestation." See Heppenstall, "Tongues in the Corinthian Church," *Ministry*, March 1974, page 10.

20. Notice, for instance, Paul's use for such expressions as: "If the whole church comes together" (1 Corinthians 14:23); "When you come together" (14:26); and "As in all the congregations of the saints" (14:33).

21. Fee, *op cit*, page 571.

22. This is the focus of Paul's argument that "the body [ie the church] is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body" (1 Corinthians 12:12). This is not to deny, by any means, that the gifts are given to particular individuals within the congregation. Instead, it is to emphasise the fact that the gifts belonged to the community.

23. Paul maintains that in regard to the matter of edification of the church, the prophesier is "greater than one who speaks in

tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified" (1 Corinthians 14:5). This would be true whether Paul is referring to actual foreign languages or some kind of ecstatic utterance.

24. See 1 Corinthians 12:8-10.

25. It is apparent that worship in the Corinthian setting was somewhat unstructured and spontaneous. Two or three persons could speak while the "others" would weigh what was said. Further, if a revelation came to one who was seated, the first speaker should stop in order to allow the revelation to be presented. Thus, prophetic messages were to be given "in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged" (verses 29-31). The result of following such directions would be peace rather than disorder (verse 33).

26. See 1 Corinthians 14:33-35. It is not my present intention to discuss the role of women in the church except to point out that Paul's directives here are given in a context of concern for orderliness in worship. Compare 1 Timothy 2:11, 12 where the context is also order (see verses 1, 2).

27. Here, Paul does not appear to have in mind an ecstatic utterance between the speaker and God, since the person with an uninterpreted message is to remain "quiet."

28. Notice, for instance, 1 Corinthians 14:36-38: "Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself is to be ignored."

29. On the latter, see the recent work by Garrie F. Williams, *Give the Holy Spirit a Chance, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Hagerstown, Maryland, 1993*; especially Williams's chapter, "Give the Holy Spirit a Chance to Make Worship Meaningful," pages 147-60.

30. It is perhaps the corporate discernment of the members of the body of Christ that primarily creates congregational and denominational culture. Cultural issues—both Adventist and community concerns—cannot be ignored in such matters as worship styles.