

The nature of Pauline glossolalia and its early reception

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Abstract

Glossolalia is a phenomenon that has perplexed biblical scholars for generations. This paper challenges the majority view that glossolalia in the New Testament refers to ecstatic utterances and argues that the only independent New Testament testimony of the phenomenon is found in 1 Corinthians.

Keywords: Acts, charism, glossolalia, Pauline reception, tongues

Introduction

With the emergence and growth of charismatic Christianity during the last century, the essence and place of glossolalia in the early church has become an increasingly important area of biblical interpretation. Although a multitude of studies arguing for certain confessional positions have emerged on the subject, an up-to-date exegetical assessment of the New Testament testimony to the phenomenon is lacking.¹ In this brief study I wish to evaluate the evidence from the early Christian sources concerning glossolalia in its own right, consciously avoiding the production of anachronistic interpretations of the texts through associations with phenomena from our time or analogies to texts from other cultures and religions. I will limit myself to the texts that explicitly refer to glossolalia. It is quite possible that other NT texts in fact refer to the same phenomenon, but if this is taken for granted, one risks reading preconceived views of the phenomenon into the texts. The earliest Christian text discussing glossolalia is 1 Corinthians, followed later by Acts and the longer ending of Mark. The phenomenon is also briefly mentioned by other early Christian authors such as Irenaeus.

I shall argue that all early Christian sources referring to glossolalia are in fact dependent on 1 Corinthians. The word *γλῶσσα* itself simply means ‘tongue’, and commonly refers to a spoken language. The scholarly world has generally viewed glossolalia as ecstatic utterances of some sort, as described in Gerhard Dautzenberg’s magisterial article on the issue in

¹ A (now rather dated) survey of the research available is Watson E. Mills (ed.), *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986).

Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum.² However, Dautzenberg's classification of glossolalia as an expression of ecstatic utterance rests more on a comparison to the speaking in tongues of modern-day charismatics and parallels in other religions than on analysis of the New Testament texts themselves. As pointed out by Dwight Moody Smith, such a presupposition may distort our understanding of how the New Testament evidence should be interpreted.³ A study of the testimony of the texts themselves gives a different suggestion of the nature of the phenomenon.

The primary source: 1 Corinthians

The earliest and most thorough discussion of glossolalia in the New Testament can be found in 1 Corinthians 12–14. Paul does not explain what glossolalia is, but presupposes that this is common knowledge among his recipients.⁴ Glossolalia is clearly a charismatic ability, albeit inferior to prophecy. When listing different charismatic gifts in 12:10, two are connected to glossolalia: *γένη γλωσσῶν* (kinds of tongues) and *ἐρμηνεῖα γλωσσῶν* (interpreting tongues). Although it is not possible to discern exactly what Paul means here, it appears that he is not referring to unintelligible ecstatic utterances, but rather to real languages not previously known to the speaker that can be interpreted by someone with the gift of interpreting tongues. When interpreted, the tongues are equal to prophecy (14:5), thus further indicating that Paul is writing about the ability to speak a foreign language. This ability to speak and interpret foreign languages is not something common to all believers, but rather a charism bestowed upon a few (12:28–29). Nor is glossolalia the essence of the Pauline gospel, but rather subordinate to love (13:8). In the same context, Paul speaks of *γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων* and *γλώσσαις τῶν ἀγγέλων* (13:1), and it would thus be odd if the rest of the discussion of glossolalia in 1 Corinthians 12–14 was foundationally different in essence. At most, this

² Gerhard Dautzenberg, 'Glossolalie', *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 11 (1981), pp. 225–46. Dautzenberg's article is, of course, not the first to propose such a solution, but summarises and establishes this as the result of the research undertaken on the issue in the decades preceding his article.

³ See Dwight Moody Smith, 'Glossolalia and Other Spiritual Gifts in a New Testament Perspective', *Interpretation* 28 (1974), pp. 307–20. See also Stuart D. Currie, 'Speaking in Tongues: Early Evidence Outside the New Testament Bearing on *Γλώσσαις Λαλεῖν*', *Interpretation* 19 (1965), pp. 274–94.

⁴ This could, of course, be an indication that significant keys to understanding the phenomenon could be found in the surrounding culture. However, such aspects go beyond the scope of this study, which focuses exclusively on what can be derived from the New Testament testimonies of glossolalia themselves.

indicates that glossolalia must not be a human language but could also be an angelic language (thus requiring supernatural interpretation). It is highly unlikely that he would use the same term for ecstatic utterances in the same context without further explanation.

The difference between glossolalia and prophecy appears to be that glossolalia is directed towards God, whereas prophecy is directed towards humans (14:2–3). Yet, it does not appear to be the content of the glossolalia that makes Paul consider it as being directed towards God and useless for the surrounding congregation, but rather the fact that they cannot understand what is being said (14:6–19). For this reason, he argues that tongues must be interpreted.

The discussion of glossolalia in relation to the unbelievers in 14:20–25 is a key passage that is not easily interpreted. Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11 to show that judgement was pronounced upon Jerusalem in foreign languages.⁵ He argues that the foreign languages are for the unbelievers whereas intelligible prophecy is for believers. He also gives the example that non-believers hearing tongues will think that the speakers are crazy, whereas non-believers hearing prophecy will repent. Paul identifies the believers as the ones who hear and respond to the message of judgement, whereas the non-believers cannot understand it. Thus, glossolalia for Paul is significant prophetic speech from God, but it is without value when it is not interpreted and understood.⁶ The fact that the message of the glossolalia is not understood is a sign of judgement for the unbeliever.⁷

In 1 Corinthians 14:15, Paul appears to be referring to the glossolalia as prayer in the Spirit (*πνεῦμα*), whereas prophecy is prayer with the mind (*νοῦς*). He has already made clear that the source for both glossolalia and prophecy is the Spirit (1 Cor 12:10). However, the human faculties at work are apparently different for the two charisms. When performing glossolalia through the Spirit, the mind is without fruit (*ἄκαρπος*; 1 Cor 14:14). Paul's statement concerning the unfruitfulness of the mind is in line with his overall exposition of glossolalia being of worth for others than the speaker

⁵ As noted by Johanson, Paul does not quote any known version of the Bible here, but rather seems to use the source text to serve his own purposes. An interpretation from the context of Isaiah is therefore not to be preferred. Bruce C. Johanson, 'Tongues, a Sign for Unbelievers? A Structural and Exegetical Study of I Corinthians XIV. 20–25', *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979), pp. 180–203.

⁶ The issue of glossolalia as a sign for non-believers has been much discussed (cf. the article by Johanson cited in n. 5).

⁷ See Krister Stendahl, 'Glossolalia – the New Testament Evidence', in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp.109–24.

only when it is understood – this is also his reason for preferring prophecy in public.

An interpretation of the primary source: Acts

Acts is written significantly later than 1 Corinthians, perhaps as late as the first quarter of the second century.⁸ It is plausible that the author of Acts had access to some kind of collection of Pauline epistles, although Acts and Paul display many foundational differences. It is of interest to discuss how the view of glossolalia in Acts relates to what is found in 1 Corinthians.⁹

The most well-known illustration of glossolalia is the account of Pentecost in Acts 2. In many ways, this occurrence of glossolalia is spectacular, since *γλῶσσαι ὡσεὶ πυρὸς* (tongues as of fire; Acts 2:3) are said to have descended upon those gathered. As the tongues of fire descended, the disciples started speaking foreign languages that were recognised by diaspora Jews that were in Jerusalem for the feast (Acts 2:5–13). The disciples spoke foreign languages as the Spirit inspired them to speak (Acts 2:4). Those who understood the languages were amazed, but those who did not mocked them and said that they were drunk. As a result of the stir, Peter and the eleven spoke to the people with the result that 3,000 were baptised (Acts 2:14–41). Peter's sermon is not described as glossolalia – the glossolalia in Acts 2 only refers to the speaking of foreign languages at the beginning of the chapter. We can see here how the author of Acts conforms to the description of tongues by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14: for those who understand the foreign languages it works as prophecy, but for those who do not, it seems mad. Peter is described as having preached in a language that was understood by all, with the result that people were cut to the heart and repented (Acts 2:37) – very similar to the results of prophecy according to Paul (1 Cor 14:24–5). Acts 2 thus follows the Pauline scheme quite closely.

The descent of the tongues of fire makes the story all the more spectacular. The tongues of fire are probably meant to underline the divine empowerment that led to the miracle of speaking foreign languages. One problem in the text that must be addressed is that the scoffers accuse the disciples of being drunk with sweet wine (Acts 2:13) – an accusation to which Peter responds in the following verse. This notion could be viewed as

⁸ Cf. Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts. Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006); and Knut Backhaus, 'Zur Datierung der Apostelgeschichte. Ein Ordnungsversuch im Chronologischen Chaos', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108 (2017), pp. 212–58.

⁹ See William O. Walker, 'Acts and the Pauline Corpus Reconsidered', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 24 (1985), pp. 3–23. See also Daniel Maguerat, *Paul in Acts and Paul in his Letters* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), p. 9; Pervo, *Dating Acts*, pp. 51–147.

supporting an interpretation of glossolalia as a form of charismatic ecstasy, but the description of the events in Acts 2 which describes the glossolalia as foreign languages being spoken in intelligible ways goes against such a notion. The fact that Acts uses *γλῶσσα* and *διάλεκτος* interchangeably also indicates that it is referring to regular human languages rather than ecstatic utterances.¹⁰ Otto Betz is probably correct in asserting that this should be viewed as typical mockery by unbelievers, similar to what is found in Matthew 11:19 and Mark 3:21.¹¹ In other words, it is more plausible that it is the content of what is said rather than the manner in which it was spoken that causes some to react in this way. A parallel passage can be found in Acts 26:24, where Festus calls Paul a madman due to the content of what he was saying. After all, when one hears uneducated men speak in foreign languages, it is rather far-fetched to assume that this is caused by abundant consumption of wine. Thus, although Peter's response to the accusation does contain a reference to the working of the Spirit, this work is not described as resulting in charismatic madness, but rather in prophecy concerning judgement. The account in Acts 2 thus fits nicely with the description of glossolalia and prophecy as signs to unbelievers in 1 Corinthians 14:20–25. At first the glossolalia is mocked by those who do not understand it, but once Peter has preached in a language that is understood by all, they repent. The glossolalia at Pentecost is used as a miracle to point at the working of the Spirit of God – a miracle consisting not of unintelligible speech, but of uneducated people speaking actual languages.

The second mention of glossolalia in Acts appears in a rather different context. Peter is speaking to the gentiles at the house of Cornelius when the Spirit descends upon the crowd, which starts speaking in tongues and praising God (*λαλούντων γλῶσσαις καὶ μεγαλυνόντων τὸν θεόν*; Acts 10:46). The Jewish believers and Peter recognise this as a work of the Spirit and conclude that they cannot withhold baptism from them (Acts 10:47). One significant function of this event in the narrative is of course to emphasise that the gentile mission was a divine rather than human initiative. Another significant dimension can be understood regarding the Pauline distinction between tongues and prophecy that Luke shows awareness of in Acts 2. Whereas prophetic speech is edifying to everyone, glossolalia can only be received and have meaning to true believers. Ergo, if the gentiles at

¹⁰ Robert H. Gundry, 'Ecstatic Utterance (N.E.B.)?', *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1966), p. 300.

¹¹ Otto Betz, 'Zungenreden und süßer Wein: Zur eschatologischen Exegese von Jesaja 28 in Qumran und im Neuen Testament', in *Jesus der Herr der Kirche: Aufsätze zur biblischen Theologie II* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), p. 61.

Cornelius's house spoke in tongues, they must have been accepted by God as true believers.

The third explicit mentioning of glossolalia in Acts is in connection with the baptisms in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–6), where the believers speak in tongues and prophesy (*ἐλάλουν τε γλώσσαις καὶ ἐπροφήτευον*) after having received baptism and the laying on of hands by Paul. It is quite possible that glossolalia was part of the spirit baptism of the Samaritans (Acts 8:14–17), although it is not explicitly stated. In that case, the glossolalia serves as a confirmation of the true faith according to the Pauline scheme outlined above.

In summary, Acts presents an understanding of glossolalia that is in line with 1 Corinthians 12–14. Glossolalia consists of the supernatural ability of speaking foreign languages and establishes a clear distinction between believers and non-believers. Believers do not necessarily understand glossolalia, but they cannot perform it unless they are believers. Those who hear and understand the glossolalia repent, but those who do not understand or accept the message accuse the glossolalists of madness.

Some further indications of early reception

The only mention of glossolalia in the New Testament that is attributed to Jesus is found in the longer ending of Mark (16:17), where Jesus says that one of the signs of the believers will be that they will speak in new tongues (*γλώσσαις λαλήσουσιν καιναῖς*). This is obviously a rather late addition, probably roughly contemporary with Acts.¹² And like Acts, the longer ending of Mark also follows the Pauline scheme, portraying glossolalia as a token of the true believers in Jesus. All miraculous abilities in the list are unique to the true believers. It is possible that the longer ending as such is dependent on the *Preaching of Peter*, but the *Preaching* does not include a reference to glossolalia, and in this case the author of the longer ending has apparently considered it valuable to add a reference to glossolalia.¹³ We cannot assume that the author of the longer ending knew Acts. However, his version of the great commission is also a summarised statement of a concept of Christian origins that somewhat resembles what is spelled out in greater detail in Acts. If glossolalia was a phenomenon

¹² James A. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentiation of Missionaries and their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), p. 475, dates the longer ending to 120–150 CE, suggesting that the earlier part of this range is more plausible.

¹³ See Paul Allan Mirecki, 'The Antithetic Saying in Mark 16:16: Formal and Redactional Features', in B. A. Pearson (ed.), *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 229–41; cf. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, p. 196.

generally thought of as having been performed by the apostles, it makes sense that later writers should seek to attribute the origin of such a practice to a commission by Jesus himself. If the author of the longer ending sought to defend Paul as a central figure in early Christianity, this move would also legitimise glossolalia as coming from Jesus rather than from Paul.¹⁴

The reference to glossolalia in the longer ending of Mark is too brief for a thorough analysis of the underlying understanding of the concept of glossolalia. However, some tentative suggestions can be made. First, glossolalia is mentioned in the context of missions with the purpose of salvation and baptism (Mark 16:15–16). Second, glossolalia is described as a *σημεῖόν* (sign) together with other types of concrete miracles such as exorcisms, healings and surviving poisonous snakes. This indicates that glossolalia was thought of as a concrete sign to accompany the preaching of the gospel. If glossolalia consisted in ecstatic madness it is hard to understand why it would have a place in this list. However, if it meant acquiring the ability to speak a foreign language, it would make sense – not least in a missionary setting. It is also worth noting that Paul calls glossolalia a *σημεῖόν* in 1 Corinthians 14:22. Third, this indicates that the early second-century author of the longer ending of Mark considered the apostles to have performed glossolalia. Modern-day scholars may question the possibility of supernaturally speaking a foreign language, but it should really not be viewed as any more inconceivable than the ability to withstand drinking poison or surviving deadly snake bites. The purpose of the text is to portray the miraculous deeds of the first generation of Christians (as they were perceived in the early second century) rather than illustrating the time of the author.

Patristic evidence of glossolalia is rather sparse, but some mentions of the phenomenon by Irenaeus are worth noting. Irenaeus mentions the speaking of tongues at Pentecost in *Against Heresies* 3.12.1 and discusses the phenomenon further in relation to Pentecost in 3.17.2, stating that ‘therefore they praise God in all languages in one accord’ (*unde et omnibus linguis conspirantes hymnum dicebant Deo*). He also discusses 1 Corinthians in *Against Heresies* 5.6.1, which we have preserved in Greek:

Just as also we hear of many brothers in the church who have prophetic gifts and in all ways speak in tongues through the spirit and bring the

¹⁴ In this context, the parallel theme of surviving poisonous snakebites in Mark 16:18 and Acts 28:1–6 could be an indication of connections between the writer of the long ending and Pauline Christianity.

hidden things of men into clearness for the common good and expound the mysteries of God.¹⁵

Irenaeus' Pauline source of inspiration is rather transparent as it is explicitly mentioned. It is interesting to note that Irenaeus shares Paul's division of prophecy and tongues, hidden things and clearness. In the same passage, Irenaeus refers to the *τελείους* of 1 Corinthians 2:6 by stating 'the speak in every tongue by the Spirit of God' (*omnibus linguis loquuntur per Spiritum Dei*), thereby making glossolalia into a characteristic of the believers. Irenaeus acknowledges that the content of the glossolalia expounds the mysteries of God through the Spirit, but in this way also presupposes that the glossolalia is interpreted so that it can be used for the common good.

Assessment of the evidence

It appears that 1 Corinthians is our sole original source of information concerning the early Christian practice of glossolalia. The accounts in Acts, Mark and Irenaeus are all likely derived from Paul in some way. Glossolalia was apparently practised by the Pauline community at Corinth and accepted in the early second century as an authentic expression of apostolic practice. However, the only account that seems to reflect direct experience of the practice is that in 1 Corinthians. Acts and Mark as well as Irenaeus have more of a distanced and descriptive relationship to the phenomenon that suggests reliance on Paul.

What, then, is the Pauline understanding of glossolalia that was handed down in early Christian tradition? First of all, there is no reason to believe that glossolalia as practised in Corinth was an expression of incomprehensible, ecstatic speech. On the contrary, Paul clearly views glossolalia as divinely inspired speech in a foreign language – be it human or 'angelic'. The first letter to the Corinthians gives no indication that the Corinthian glossolalia was ever understood by foreigners, but Paul and his congregation obviously considered it to be speech that could – and should – be interpreted by means of the spiritual gift of interpretation. Acts clearly views glossolalia as consisting of an ability to speak foreign languages, stating that diaspora Jews understood what was said, although it is uncertain whether the author had any first-hand experience of the phenomenon. Glossolalia in Acts also functions as a means of recognising

¹⁵ καθὼς καὶ πολλῶν ἀκούομεν ἀδελφῶν ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ προφητικὰ χάρισματα ἐχόντων καὶ παντοδαπαῖς λαλούντων διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος γλώσσαις καὶ τὰ κρύφια τῶν ἀνθρώπων εἰς φανερὸν ἀγόντων ἐπὶ τῷ συμφέροντι καὶ τὰ μυστήρια τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκδιηγουμένων. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.7.6.

true believers in new ethnic groups: first among the Samaritans, and then among the gentiles. Further, both the longer ending of Mark and Irenaeus speak of glossolalia as a legitimate expression of apostolic Christianity, but neither text suggests that the writer had personal acquaintance with the phenomenon. In summary, although second-century Christian writers shows an awareness and acceptance of glossolalia, they do not show any signs of personal acquaintance with it, but rather draw on and interpret the Pauline understanding of the phenomenon as described in 1 Corinthians as an authentic aspect of apostolic faith.