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### Seven Theories

Much of the current literature tends to regard glossolalia as a true expression of a spiritual gift, closely akin to, if not identical with, the phenomenon of Pentecost as related in the New Testament book of Acts. Some researchers however are inclined to treat it as an almost purely psychological manifestation.

This chapter summarizes the views of seven authors on the spiritual and psychological factors related to glossolalia.

#### *LAURENCE CHRISTENSON*

Laurence Christenson does not employ psychological categories to explain glossolalia. In his book *Speaking in Tongues*, he affirms that it is totally a spiritual experience. He believes that the phenomenon "involves a supernatural manifestation of the Holy Spirit which is clearly spoken of in the Bible."<sup>1</sup> Christenson, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in San Pedro, California and a leading figure in the neo-Pentecostal movement, is critical of those who downgrade glossolalia as a fad or as mere emotionalism. He admits of no possibility that true tongue-speaking could be a sign of mental instability. He states that in

1. Laurence Christenson, *Speaking in Tongues* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Publishers, 1968), p. 18.

recent years “thousands and perhaps millions” of Christians of every denomination have testified that they have received this “gift of the Spirit,” and that it has resulted in a rebirth of faith for many (p. 15 and *passim*). He feels that in an era so often characterized as post-Christian, this resurgence of the Spirit should be neither ignored nor denigrated.

Christenson interprets biblical speaking in tongues as an act neither of teaching nor of instruction, but rather of worship and adoration. He believes that this is also true of present-day manifestations. Neither in cases where the language is unknown nor where it is at least unknown to the speaker, does the latter “control” the meaning of what he is saying. Others in the congregation may interpret, but this is also considered a gift from the Holy Ghost. Christenson asserts that the dictionary definition of language—“Any means, vocal or otherwise, of expressing or communicating feeling or thought”—also accurately defines glossolalia.

Christenson does not consider that a glossolalist is either “hysterical” or “ecstatic.” Although possibly the hearer is described in the Bible as “ecstatic (existanto)—Acts 2:7, or amazed (ex-estesan)—Acts 10:45” (p. 24), the terms are nowhere applied to biblical speakers.

### GEORGE BARTON CUTTEN

The many psychological explanations of glossolalia that have been advanced over the years are discussed in detail by George Barton Cutten (chapter 9, *passim*), in *Speaking with Tongues*, which has been the standard work in this field since it was written in 1927.<sup>2</sup> But Cutten makes the point that such explanations are at best only partial, since to name a psychological condition does not explain it, and it does not necessarily exclude the possibility of divine causation.

2. George Barton Cutten, *Speaking with Tongues: Historically and Psychologically Considered* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927).

Cutten states that a *modern* (1927) psychological interpretation of glossolalia stresses that the person who speaks in tongues must be considered to be experiencing a state of "personal disintegration in which the verbo-motive centers of the subject are obedient to subconscious impulses" (p. 160). The take-over by the subconscious is similar to that manifested in automatic writing and in various kinds of hallucinatory experiences. The mental excitement which produces glossolalia also often coincides with visions and auditory hallucinations. However, Cutten recognizes that the desire of some Christians to experience all of the gifts promised by Christ has been a continuing one.

Glossolalia as a psychological condition, says Cutten, is usually ascribed to hysteria, ecstasy, or catalepsy. Hysteria is a condition in which the individual is extremely susceptible to suggestion and any sensations he feels are exaggerated. The ecstatic condition by contrast seems to be so dominated by some central idea that there is suspension of sensation similar to the cataleptic state.

Although catalepsy is usually characterized by rigidity of the body, a symptom rarely present in those who speak in tongues, some psychologists have characterized glossolalists as cataleptic. However, in the form of catalepsy which some authorities feel closely resembles the condition of tongue-speakers, the person affected afterward remembers any visions or auditory hallucinations experienced while unconscious.

Cutten does not agree with the opinion that glossolalia is a form of hypnotism. It is true that certain requisites for successful inducement of the hypnotic state are also present in tongue-speaking, such as rapport between the subject and the leader, uniformity of perception, fixation of the subject's attention, and suggestion. But Cutten believes that the experience of hypnotism differs fundamentally from that of glossolalia.

He defines the various degrees of speaking in tongues as "1) inarticulate sounds, 2) articulate sounds which simulate words, and 3) fabricated or coined words" (p. 169), and

ascribes them to an abnormal mental condition of the speaker. He asserts that it has been well documented that in cases when a speaker has used a foreign language formerly unknown to him the speaker has in reality been sufficiently exposed to the language to speak it; it existed in his subconscious and was brought out under abnormal conditions, without volition on his part. Cutten cites a number of thoroughly investigated cases which support this theory.

#### ANTHONY A. HOEKEMA

*What About Tongue Speaking?* is a biblical and theological evaluation of glossolalia by the professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. The author does not believe that the phenomenon is divinely inspired, yet he states that there is much of value in the experience. He concedes that it has struck a deep spiritual response in many persons.

Hoekema cites V. Raymond Edman to substantiate his views. Edman argues that there are only three possible explanations of the phenomenon: (1) it is a gift of the Spirit, (2) it is a snare of the devil, or (3) it is an abnormal psychological condition.<sup>3</sup> Because glossolalia is not always a religious experience, but arises in a variety of individuals and groups subjected to strongly repressed emotional forces, Hoekema inclines to the view that it is a psychological phenomenon which is readily produced and easily understood.

But the evidence that many persons, especially among the neo-Pentecostals, have affirmed a "true spiritual rebirth" as the result of their speaking in tongues is for him a major difficulty. He concludes therefore that resurgence of faith results from conditions preceding and accompanying glossolalia. The hours

3. V. Raymond Edman, "Divine or Devilish?" *Christian Herald* 87 (May, 1964): 14-16, quoted in Anthony A. Hoekema, *What About Tongue-Speaking?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), p. 126.

spent in earnest meditation and prayer, the heartfelt desire to be closer to God, cannot help but produce a more fervent and perfect "spiritual harmony." Glossolalia itself is irrelevant to the rebirth of faith.

### MORTON T. KELSEY

Morton T. Kelsey, rector (in 1961) of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Monrovia, California, summarizes four different evaluations of glossolalia as follows: (1) it is a psychological abnormality or demonic possession (interchangeable from some points of view), (2) we do not know what it is—the original experience of Pentecost and related experiences have never been correctly interpreted, (3) speaking in tongues was useful in the early days of the church but is no longer of value, or (4) it is a spiritual gift, as valid today as in the times of the Apostles and given directly by the Holy Spirit.

Kelsey states that his research clearly shows glossolalia to be different in both kind and quality from either an ecstatic, hysterical experience or an innocuous release of strong religious emotions. He is very much interested in Freud's theory of the unconscious and in Jung's of the collective unconscious. He sees in the latter especially an explanation and validation of glossolalia.

Kelsey feels that if religion is a viable part of an individual's life, contact with the world of the "Spirit" can and often will be achieved. Openness to religious experience is frequently the hallmark of the individual who seeks closer union with God through tongue-speaking. The same openness to psychic reality, Kelsey believes, also results in faith healing, both of the mind and of the body.<sup>4</sup>

Kelsey discusses five views of glossolalia as a psychologically

4. Morton T. Kelsey, *Tongue-Speaking: An Experiment in Spiritual Experience* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961), pp. 192 *et seq.*

caused phenomenon: i.e., as (1) a manifestation of schizophrenia, (2) a form of hysteria, (3) a result of hypnotism, (4) a case of autosuggestion, and (5) an exalted memory based on repression (p. 210).

He reports some authorities as holding that tongue-speaking is a schizophrenic manifestation because the speaker allows himself to be possessed—or dispossessed—by the contents of his unconscious. It exhibits a typical schizophrenic pattern. Kelsey disagrees with this evaluation because the tongue-speaker suffers no damage to his ego and remains clearly able to differentiate between reality and unreality, both before and after the experience. A person already mentally ill might be unable to recover from the experience of tongue-speaking; however it would not be the fault of tongue-speaking per se, for such a victim would be unable to withstand any sort of strong assault on his ego. Kelsey does not believe that there is any causal relation between tongue-speaking and schizophrenia.

The theory that glossolalia is a form of hysteria is held by many workers in the field. Kelsey disagrees; while stating that both hysteria and tongue-speaking obviously arise in the unconscious, he sees no other connection. Hysteria is an illness which harms the mind and sometimes the body; glossolalia seems to result in an increased ability to cope with reality, both material and spiritual.

With regard to hypnotism Kelsey's views are similar to those of Hoekema, recognizing the fact that both hypnotism and speaking in tongues can open the mind to the unconscious. Here, says Kelsey, the likeness ceases.

The theory that glossolalia is a form of autosuggestion he dismisses out of hand as having little pertinence, for he thinks it extremely doubtful that an individual can "autosuggest himself into a transforming religious experience" (p. 211). And exalted memory, he observes, offers no explanation as to what might trigger the experience. Nor does that theory really explain the

resulting spiritual value so often associated with glossolalia.

Kelsey propounds two additional psychological explanations of the experience of tongue-speaking: one based on its similarity to dreams in providing avenues of meaningful contact with the inner world of the spirit; the other on its similarity to visions. Both are contacts with psychic reality.

Glossolalia is a significant psychological and religious phenomenon, according to Kelsey, best understood in relation to the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious.

#### *JAMES N. LAPSLEY AND JOHN H. SIMPSON*

Lapsley and Simpson's article, "Speaking in Tongues," appeared in two parts in *Pastoral Psychology* and is concerned with the psychological significance of the phenomenon. The authors, professors at Princeton Theological Seminary, treat glossolalia from a psychological standpoint as psychomotor behavior with similarities to trance states, somnambulism, mediumship, and automatic writing. They advance the theory that individuals who have a deep need for personal security and emotional expression provide the bulk of those engaged in the neo-Pentecostal movement. Leaders are drawn from the ever-increasing number of ministers and clergymen in all denominations who have found themselves frustrated and anxious about their function and purpose in the traditional church.<sup>5</sup>

Speaking in tongues does indeed serve as a "singular emotional outlet." Several in-depth studies of tongue-speaking Pentecostals indicate that they are very troubled people; they exhibit more anxiety and personality instability than non-Pentecostals or non-tongue-speaking Pentecostals.

Neo-Pentecostals often emphasize the positive mental health

5. James N. Lapsley and John H. Simpson, "Speaking in Tongues: Token of Group Acceptance and Divine Approval," Parts I and II, *Pastoral Psychology*, May, 1964; September, 1964. This reference is to Part I, p. 52.

aspects of the phenomenon. Pentecostals do not. Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious figures largely in the neo-Pentecostals' concept of the meaning or source of glossolalia, and as we have seen, Morton Kesley also espouses this view. It is used to explain how a person can speak in a known tongue of which he has, and could have had, no knowledge, or in a tongue not recognized as any language but which might well be an unknown language either of the past or the present.

Lapsley and Simpson, in attempting to define the phenomenon in psychological terms, liken it to the form of automatism found in trance states and sleepwalking, because all or nearly all the voluntary muscles are dissociated from conscious control. Automatism is considered to provide an escape valve for deep-seated conflicts within the individual.

Lapsley and Simpson declare that the total experience of glossolalia enables the tongue-speaker to express his feelings without ambivalence. This accounts for the overwhelming sensations of joy and release so often reported.

The authors are convinced by their research that emphasis on the demonic seems to be essential to both the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements. Tongue-speakers, say Lapsley and Simpson, apparently attain the same release from inner tensions as did ancients who were "possessed of the devil," with the advantage that glossolalia is not painful nor physically exhausting, contrary to the classical paroxysmal demon-possession (Part II, p. 19).

These authors consider that the practice of glossolalia includes a self-aggrandizing, narcissistic component. But they do not think that it hastens or causes a permanent disintegration of the personality but rather believe that due to the lessening of inner conflict the practice may in some cases be beneficial.

They are essentially ambivalent about the positive and negative effects of the practice. They feel that it does help some people reduce their inner conflicts and cope more adequately

with the world. But the element of self-aggrandizement leads some to overemphasize their "specialness," isolating them along with their peer group from the mainstream of society.

The authors by stating that they consider glossolalia to be neither meaningless and infantile babble, nor yet a direct conversation with God, but rather "a dissociative expression of truncated personality development" (Part II, p. 24), in effect hold it to be a compartmentalized bit of behavior of an immature person.

#### WAYNE E. OATES

Wayne E. Oates is professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Intellectualization, institutionalization, and sophistication all result in the repression of deep religious feelings by many people, writes Oates in "A Socio-Psychological Study of Glossolalia." If these emotions finally break through it is understandable that the first attempts at communicating them sound like babble. However, individuals who overemphasize the glossolalic experience and become isolated from society because they feel unique may be considered psychopathological. Since not all tongue-speakers follow this pattern, no generalizations can be made as to the mental health of glossolalics.

Oates's treatise deals with studies of children's language and attempts to correlate these studies with glossolalia as "a child-like form of language."<sup>6</sup>

What some authorities call "infantile babble" is more scientifically described as similar to the second or parataxic phase of an infant's attempts to communicate. During this period the toddler repeats sounds which are meaningless to the listener but satis-

6. Wayne E. Oates, "A Socio-Psychological Study of Glossolalia," in Frank Stagg, E. Glenn Hinson, and Wayne E. Oates, *Glossolalia: Tongue Speaking in Biblical, Historical, and Psychological Perspective* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 78.

fyng to the child. Another speech pattern typical of this level of development involves "dual or collective monologues."<sup>7</sup> The youngster still does not make sense in his speech, but is stimulated by the presence of another person or persons who are not included in the monologue or expected to respond to it. Oates believes that this accurately describes the phenomenon of glossolalia.

The distortions of speech which appear at this time are submerged by the child as he matures. According to Oates, these distortions reappear in tongue-speaking; as the individual tries to verbalize long-repressed religious convictions for the first time, he reverts to an early stage of communicative skill.

In discussing the possible connection between glossolalia and mental illness, Oates examines various mental states in which voluntary muscles are controlled by the unconscious. He refers to Lapsley and Simpson's characterization of glossolalia as a form of dissociation.

Sleep is one such mental stage; sexual orgasm is another. Relaxation of conscious control also occurs normally in socially acceptable mass or mob activity; for instance, at sports events or in lynching and rioting, relaxation takes an excessive form. Relaxation is attained in psychiatric practice by hypnosis, psychoanalysis, chemotherapy (sodium amytal, tranquilizers, etc), and electroconvulsive and insulin-convulsive therapy.

This book also questions the reasons for the present resurgence of the practice of glossolalia and for its appearance in different social strata than before. Some churchmen ascribe it to the renewed activity of the Holy Spirit. Oates believes it to be a breakthrough of deeply felt but long pent-up passions, which find expression in sounds unintelligible to the listener but meaningful to the speaker. Oates asserts that tongue-speakers tend to have weak egos, confused identities, high anxiety levels, and generally unstable personalities. Neo-Pentecostals particularly are often

7. Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), pp. 87, 88.

members of the affluent middle class, professionals or quasi-professionals, suffering from the emotional deprivation common to our times. Sometimes individuals of this socio-economic level try to "break through" their loneliness by means of alcohol and/or drugs. Speaking in tongues, Oates feels, provides a form of breaking through which allows the psychically ill to communicate their deep and too-long-repressed religious emotions in a socially acceptable form.

#### JOHN L. SHERRILL

*They Speak with Other Tongues* is a personal account of the experience of glossolalia.<sup>8</sup> John Sherrill, a reporter and writer on the staff of *Guideposts* magazine, begins his story with a series of events which occurred during a serious illness. Although a practicing Christian all his life, he was then for the first time overcome by a deeply emotional consciousness of Christ. From it he dates his gradual involvement with glossolalia.

His initial "encounter with Christ" in a hospital room left a spiritual exaltation but eventually began to fade. Then he met Harold Bredesen, at that time pastor of the First Reformed Church in Mount Vernon, New York, and a leader in the neo-Pentecostal movement. Bredesen told Sherrill of his own experiences and Sherrill was inspired to undertake in-depth research into a religious interpretation of glossolalia with particular reference to the Pentecostal sects.

He began his study by acquainting himself with members and small groups within traditional churches who were practicing tongue-speaking. He was struck by the element of secrecy which at that time surrounded their activities, but found it could be accounted for by the hostility of pastors and other members of their congregations to the phenomenon and its practitioners. Sherrill does not comment on the psychological theory which explains secrecy as a vital part of the mystique of an in-group.

8. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964.

In 1960 Sherrill heard a sermon by Father Bennett of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Van Nuys, California, in which the preacher witnessed to his own experience with tongue-speaking and the charismatic renewal movement in which he played a decisive role.

Sherrill's highly colored personal narrative emphasizes his belief that glossolalia is a gift of the Holy Spirit, one which has a firm historical background and is again assuming the importance it had in the early days of the church. Sherrill sees the practice as a response to the needs of modern Christians in an essentially godless society.

His description of his own experience closely parallels the clinical exposition stated by Lapsley and Simpson in psychological terms as a "singular emotional outlet." Sherrill observes his own gradual loss of self-awareness, his cognizance that he was "speaking" in unintelligible grunts. He emphasizes the deep inner sense of joy and satisfaction that he received in the process. He states that he felt at peace with warring factions inside himself and experienced psychic healing. Faith healing is covered at length in the book, since Sherrill feels it to be closely bound to speaking in tongues.

Sherrill, who views glossolalia in a purely religious context, does not advance psychological explanations for the phenomenon, but his experiences and the language in which he expresses himself closely parallel the psychological explanations by other writers. They are particularly similar to the Jungian theory of an experienced psychic reality which somehow "fused together the antagonistic elements of the individual personality. . . . These warring opposites within the total personality . . . came to reconciliation and peace."

Sherrill is interested in what he calls the "group mind." He believes that "intimate, sustaining group-fellowship" is a distinguishing feature of glossolalia.