

GLOSSOLALIA,  
A READER

by

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

The amount of literature that has been generated by and about the Pentecostal/charismatic movement within the past ten years is prodigious. A religious movement which had its birth within this century and which now numbers adherents close to 200,000,000 worldwide is a phenomenon that must be taken seriously. This reader brings together representative material treating one aspect of this very significant movement.

The specific focus of this reader is the Pentecostal phenomenon normally referred to as glossolalia, or--in its common English form--speaking in tongues. Though, as will be noted briefly below, the phenomenon in question under almost all circumstances would be more properly referred to as "ecstatic speech", the focus in the reader is not on the question of the relationship between this phenomenon and that scriptural phenomenon properly referred to as "glossolalia". Nevertheless, for the sake of avoiding further confusion the word "glossolalia" will be used here to refer to the practice of ecstatic speech which is described by the various writers brought together in this reader.

With few exceptions, these writers make little reference to scriptural exegesis, and even where they do the interpretations are normally quite unsatisfactory and superficial. Rather, the focus here is in the direction of the practice of glossolalia. What describes this phenomenon? How new or how ancient is the practice? When and where has it appeared? What is the psychology

of tongues speaking? What can be said about it linguistically? Is it language in the ordinary sense of the word? If not, what else might it be?

The selection of these sixteen articles can be approximately divided (though not neatly, because of the varied sources from which we draw) along four themes. The first six articles (pp. 1-102) furnish a general survey of the phenomenon of glossolalia, with a particular focus on the occurrence of glossolalia in various historical and cultural settings. The second grouping of articles (six of them, pp. 103-171) turns more generally to questions about the psychology of glossolalia. The third grouping (three articles, pp. 172-217) deals with glossolalia as a linguistic phenomenon. The sixteenth article, by A. R. Tippett, deals with the important question of the taxonomy of glossolalia--an issue which is hinted at and even seriously discussed in some of the other articles, but which receives more fresh and comprehensive treatment from Tippett.

A common problem that characterizes the first six articles is the superficial and presumptive way in which the scriptural data concerning glossolalia is treated. First, it will be noted that Old Testament passages such as those concerning Saul and the prophets, David dancing before the ark, and Elijah and the prophets of Baal are offered as examples of glossolalia in the Old Testament when in point of fact there is no reference made to ecstatic speech in any of those cases. The most that can be said about them is that they are examples of ecstatic behavior, and

even in the case of David dancing before the ark the assumption of ecstatic behavior is not necessarily warranted.

Second, Maloney and Lovekin grossly misread the Acts 2 account of the glossolalic Pentecost by suggesting that the audience was ignorant of what the 120 were saying. Bunn hardly does better in referring to what happened there as "frenzied speech".

Third, aside from some rather common misinterpretations of 1 Corinthians 14 it is not at all clear that the New Testament describes glossolalia as ecstatic speech. But virtually all of the authors cited assume precisely that glossolalia is some form of ecstatic speech--in which the speaker utters sounds (whether animal sounds, phonations frustes, the language of spirits, sacerdotal language, or xenoglossia) for which he does not know the meaning. That is why it would seem more conducive to clear scholarship to substitute the expression "ecstatic speech" for virtually all of the instances where "glossolalia" is used. The former is not what is described in Acts 2, while the latter certainly is.

Another theme that runs throughout the articles is that glossolalists (using the term, again, in the not-so-accurate way it is normally employed) are from the lower economic and more emotionally unbalanced segments of their societies (Lapsley and Simpson, Bunn). However, it would be highly doubtful if a cross-section of glossolalists in the 1990s would provide as much evidence for such a hypothesis as it might have thirty years ago.

May's article, following the lead of Lombard's work published very early in the century, is a land-mark in developing a taxonomy for glossolalia. May outlines six types of glossolalia, which are largely criticized by the Malony and Lovekin article, and applauded by Tippet in the final article in this reader. In addition, May gives some very sketchy but tantalizing descriptions of the global distribution of various types of glossolalia: xenoglossia dominating in Africa, sacerdotal and phonations frustes dominating in Indonesia and Malaya, and others dominating in Siberia. This is certainly an area where further research is demanded.

One thing that is made exceedingly clear in the first six articles is that glossolalia is both a world-wide and an age-old phenomenon. It extends from the spiritualistic domain to the religious, and obviously--especially in the twentieth century--into the Christian. It spans almost every conceivable cultural and religious boundary, and yet provides common characteristics that allow it to be treated as a single phenomenon.

As we have noted, the second grouping of six articles (pp. 103-171) turns more generally to questions about the psychology of glossolalia. Two of the articles, however, are of a generally more summary nature--Kildahl's "Seven Theories" chapter (pp. 115-126), and Jones' "Glossolalia" (pp. 143-162). In the former article Kildahl examines the explanations of seven writers about the spiritual and psychological factors behind glossolalia--unfortunately without offering any significant criticisms of his

own. The writers he examines include two glossolalists, and range all the way from Cutten, who did his own research early in this century, to Larry Christensen, who still writes today as an influential neo-Pentecostal.

Two articles in this section from the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion are especially noteworthy. The first, published in 1969, is Virginia Hine's "Pentecostal Glossolalia" (pp. 127-142). Here Hine examines the research of scholars such as Alland (1967), Boisen (1939), Kiev (1964), Vivier (1960), Wood (1965), Plog (1965), and Gerrard and Gerrard (1966) and draws the conclusion that earlier explanations of glossolalia as resulting from psychological pathology (including suggestibility, hypnosis, or other neuroses) or from social deprivation or disorganization are not supported by more current research. Rather, glossolalia is more responsibly seen as learned behavior (probably learnable by a very wide range of psychologically "normal" people) which is an important part of personality reorganization. Hine therefore is typical of psychological researchers who begin to discard some of the earliest theories propounded by Cutter and others.

The most significant article in this second grouping is probably the last. Published five years after Hine's article, and in the same journal, James T. Richardson's reexamines research on the psychology of glossolalia. Hines takes issue with the conclusion of some recent research which contends that there is no relationship between psychological and personality factors and

glossolalia. At the same time, he faults Hines and others for inadequate research. He suggests that very frequently there is lack of adequate information about design and data gathering, and that much of the research is too subjective. He complains that one of the most common inadequacies is the lack of longitudinal studies where those being tested are observed and retested over a long enough period of time to determine what psychological differences there might be between preglossolalists, antiglossolalists, and glossolalists. He cites Lincoln Vivier's unpublished dissertation as an example of faulty research which nevertheless was done in a context ideally suited to such longitudinal study.

The third grouping of articles (pp. 172-217) deals with glossolalia as a linguistic phenomenon. The first two are written by researcher/linguist-cum-participant, William J. Samarin. He describes glossolalia linguistically as derivative speech, in the sense that it is the reduction of one's native language to its basic phonological components. He also avers that any person with normal linguistic capabilities can produce glossolalia in a normal state of consciousness. His most unique contribution is in attempting to characterize glossolalia in terms of the linguistic understandings and explanations of the participants themselves--reacting sharply to other anthropologists who have declared that the theological and linguistic self-understanding of glossolalists is not important.

In Samarin's second article (pp. 190-204) he incorporates the



importance of the self-understanding of glossolalists in an extended definition of glossolalia. Linguistically, glossolalia must be distinguished from mere gibberish, because it normally is characterized by a remarkable number of phonological units. In short, it sounds more like a language than it does like sheer incoherent gibberish. It is, however, meaningless. Glossolalia offers no correlations between units of speech and experience, and hence linguistically is meaningless.

Felicitas Goodman moves in a different direction by examining the phonetics of four distinct glossolalic settings, from two native language settings (English and Spanish). Her infelicitous assertions that "tent revivals were brought to this country by immigrants from the lower English class", and that tent evangelists are normally not affiliated with any established church do not enhance her obvious skills as a linguist. She builds on the basis of research demonstrating that glossolalists basically enjoy as good as or better mental health than the average citizenry, and defines glossolalia as "an event of vocalization uttered while the speaker is in a state of dissociation termed trance".

The final article in this reader is a contribution from A. R. Tippett on the taxonomy of glossolalia--a theme discussed partially by May and Bunn in the first section of the reader. Tippett verbalizes a tension which runs throughout the entire reader, namely, that "the researcher has to be a believer, as it were, even if he is not an actual participant". By this, he

underscores the importance of taking the perspectives and explanations of the glossolalists themselves into consideration. Otherwise, the sense which is gotten out of the practice of glossolalia may only be valid for the researcher himself and will leave him with a very deficient taxonomy.

Unlike the other authors in this reader, Tippett relates glossolalia to spirit possession, in effect making it a subcategory of spirit possession. He differentiates the character, manifestations and formal stimuli involved in various patterns of glossolalia, and eventually breaks down glossolalia into six basic types. Tippett's taxonomy, however, is subject to the general weakness alluded to at the beginning of this review--in not differentiating adequately between scripturally-described glossolalia (Acts 2) and the much more common ecstatic speech. A more adequate taxonomy is needed, and has yet to be offered.