

Deaf and the Initial Physical Evidence

PARACLETE 29/3 (Summer 1995) 37-45

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The Pentecostal revival at the turn of this century brought a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God. In addition to a heightened awareness of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, much debate has been generated over the evidence of this baptism. The phenomenon of *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) as the initial physical evidence has become a key part of this discussion. Over the past several years, this discussion has gone beyond the traditional debate of spoken tongues. Throughout various parts of the United States and the world, deaf people are reporting speaking in unknown signed tongues. Are these experiences legitimate? Is speaking in an unknown signed tongue equivalent to speaking in an unknown audible tongue? Can this experience be accepted as the initial physical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit? What is the biblical understanding of this experience? These and other related questions are being raised increasingly. In the following pages, examination will be given to a historical, practical, and biblical understanding of this experience.¹

HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF DEAF AND THE INITIAL EVIDENCE

This is not the first time an experience of this nature has been discussed. Early Pentecostals reported various manifestations of the baptism in the Holy Spirit.² These included speaking in unknown tongues, writing in unknown tongues, signing in unknown tongues, singing in the Spirit and laughing in the Spirit. From the earliest days of the Pentecostal revival, speaking in unknown signed tongues was acknowledged as an evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The first issue of the Pentecostal Apostolic Faith newspaper in 1906 states: "The Lord has given languages to the unlearned. . . ." The article goes on to state many of the languages in which people have spoken in tongues, and among the languages listed is "the deaf-mute language."³ The experience of signing in tongues was not isolated to this early period. Anecdotal evidence of signed glossolalia among hearing ministers is not hard to find. Most veteran ministers in Deaf Ministries have encountered hearing people who have signed under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Harry Brotzman reports a baptism experience that took place in 1963. "The staff member was 'slain' under the power of God for 16 hours. Much of this time was spent speaking in other tongues as the Spirit gave utterance, and also in the language of signs-beautifully signed. My wife and I were able to interpret the beautiful signs she was using." He writes elsewhere, "That morning three other girls, none of whom had studied the language of signs, gave praises to God in the signs."⁴ Speaking in unknown signed tongues was not limited to hearing people, but has also been documented among deaf people. This is not by any means a new phenomenon within the Assemblies of God. Recently, a group of deaf ministers were asked whether they had experienced signed glossolalia prior to the recent outbreak of this phenomenon, and most said yes.⁵

Throughout this time, not only did some deaf people speak in unknown signed tongues, but some also spoke in unknown audible tongues when filled with the Spirit. There are numerous accounts of deaf people being filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking forth clearly in an audible voice in a language which they had never learned. This is truly miraculous because God had to overcome speech impediments and give them the ability to speak. Also, this is a wonderful

argument for the validity of tongues, since there is no way these people could be imitating what they have heard others do.

While various evidences were apparently accepted early in the Pentecostal revival, many of these manifestations of the Spirit became regarded as secondary, and speaking in unknown audible tongues came to be accepted by many as the initial physical evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Part of the reason for this could be that it was uniform with what was happening on a greater scale in hearing circles. Currently, some Pentecostal denominations consider speaking in unknown audible tongues to be the primary physical manifestation acceptable as the initial evidence for the deaf.⁶

PRACTICAL EXAMINATION OF DEAF AND THE INITIAL EVIDENCE

There are several factors which have greatly influenced the present discussion of the deaf and initial evidence. These include misconceptions regarding sign language and the deaf culture. Sadly, many people are remarkably ignorant about deafness ... ignorant and indifferent. This is especially true in the area of communication. The simple act of vocalizing speech is so basic to the everyday pattern of communication among hearing people that it is taken for granted. One must be careful not to make this mistake when considering the deaf.

Deaf and Signed Communication

The normal mode of communication in the deaf world is often sign language. There have been many misconceptions about sign language. First, the notion that signing is nothing more than a sort of pantomime, or pictorial language, was almost universally held even thirty years ago. In the late 1950s, William Stokoe proved that it was nothing of the sort. It satisfied every linguistic criterion of a genuine language. It is a language that has intricate and complex morphology, syntax and grammar. "Findings confirm at a neurological level, that sign is a language and is treated as such by the brain, even though it is visual rather than auditory, and spatially rather than sequentially organized. And as a language, it is processed by the left hemisphere of the brain, which is biologically specialized for just this function."⁷ This study assisted people in confronting the reality of sign language as a real language.

Another misunderstanding is that sign language is a universal language. Just as there are many different spoken languages, so there are many different signed languages. "This notion that sign language is uniform and universal, and enables deaf people all over the world to communicate with one another instantly, is still quite widespread. This is quite untrue. More than 60 distinct sign languages have been noted by Gallaudet University researcher John Van Cleve."⁸ There can be no doubt that the sign languages of the deaf are all different languages, and "even the sign language used by the deaf in one country may at times be in part incomprehensible to those in another one."⁹

Signed languages are definitely proven to be intelligible languages, similar to German, Chinese, Swedish, English, or any other language. The only thing that makes them different from any of these other languages is simply the mode of communication. Sign conveys its message visually instead of audibly, through hands instead of a tongue. Sign language should be seen as a language whose mode of communication allows for individuals who do not communicate verbally. To reject sign language is to reject the deaf person's mode of language and communication. It is sad but true that the deaf individual is often judged by the hearing person's

standard. "When we attempt to make a deaf person as much as possible like a hearing person ... we are asking him to become a person he is not, and are denying the person that he is."¹⁰

Deaf and Verbal Communication

There is a common misunderstanding that the terms "deaf and dumb" and "deaf-mute" infer that those born deaf are unable to speak. Many deaf people are, of course, perfectly capable of speech. They have the same speech apparatus as anyone else; what they lack is the ability to hear their own speech, and thus to monitor its sound by ear. "Their speech, therefore, may be abnormal in amplitude and tone, with many omitted consonants and other speech sounds, sometimes so much so as to be unintelligible.... Moreover, the pre-lingually deaf have no auditory image, no idea what speech actually sounds like, no idea of a sound-meaning correspondence. What is essentially an auditory phenomenon must be grasped and controlled by non-auditory means."¹¹ Their ability to communicate orally depends on several factors such as if the person has been deaf since birth or how long after birth they became deaf. However, for the profoundly deaf, or those who have been deaf most of their lives, oral communication, specifically speech, can be next to impossible.¹² It is this which poses great difficulties to the practicality of requiring all deaf people to speak audibly in tongues.

Deaf and Speaking In Tongues

While deaf persons who cannot speak a word can and do receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in unknown audible tongues, "this has been little studied ... and, for that matter, rarely observed among Pentecostals."¹³ Many deaf do not use their voices and find it difficult to do so. Consequently, many struggle with Holy Spirit baptism due to this problem.¹⁴ Sadly, many in the deaf church have not placed tremendous emphasis on the baptism in the Holy Spirit because of the practical obstacles of speaking audibly in tongues. In the instances where baptism is being experienced with the evidence of speaking in unknown signed tongues, deaf congregations and individuals claim this experience to be much more meaningful. Due to the historical lack of emphasis for the deaf and the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and due to the increasing experience of the baptism evidenced by speaking in unknown signed tongues, the question is raised: Is signing in a language one has never learned a valid equivalent to speaking in a language one has never learned as the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit?

BIBLICAL EXAMINATION OF DEAF AND THE INITIAL EVIDENCE

Some accept signed glossolalia as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit but not as the biblical initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Their reasons include the view that since the 120 in the upper room "spoke" and those in Jerusalem "heard," there is no reason to expect the experience of the deaf people receiving the baptism should be different regarding initial physical evidence. Also, it is believed that "speaking in tongues" clearly emphasizes the physical organs of the voice box and tongue at work. Others maintain that speaking in unknown signed tongues is a valid application of the doctrine of initial physical evidence. A closer examination will be given to these considerations. Examination will be given to Acts chapter 2, for it is a key passage in developing a proper concept of the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the initial evidence of this experience. There are seven elements of this passage which provide insight into a proper understanding of this discussion.

Biblical Understanding of the Term "Tongue"

The first area of examination is the meaning of the term "tongue." A proper understanding of the biblical use of this term is crucial to this discussion. The phenomenon of speaking in tongues is most frequently represented in the Greek New Testament by the noun *glossais* (with tongues) in combination with the verb *laleo* (speak) to form the English transliteration *glossolalia*.¹⁵ While originally *glossa* meant tongue in the physiological sense, the organ of taste and speech, it moved beyond this definition.¹⁶ The term "tongue" appears in the Bible only rarely in a purely anatomical sense.¹⁷ Even when the meaning seems primarily physical, the figurative element is often predominant. Figuratively, *glossa* stands for language.¹⁸ This is the usage of the term in Acts 2:4.

"Tongue" is not referring to a physical organ of the body, but rather to the communication of language. The synonymy of "tongue" and "language" is so characteristic of Hebrew, Greek, and English that the two words are used interchangeably as translations of the Hebrew *lason* and Greek *glossa*. The RSV and other modern versions usually choose "language" instead of "tongue."¹⁹ A second Greek term, *dialektos* (dialect), appears in Acts 2:6,8. This also conveys the meaning of language. The common verb *lego* (speak) was never used in conjunction with speaking in tongues.²⁰ In Acts, *laleo* sometimes carries a special significance, being clearly associated with inspired speech.

Thus, it would appear that "the use of the word tongue as speaking only with the physical tongue is a most unlikely explanation. It seems that language is the basic meaning."²¹ This use of the term does not restrict the mode of communication to an auditory one, nor does it exclude the communication of language through a visual mode. If the term "tongue" is simply to be recognized as the communication of language, then it would follow that sign language would be appropriate for the deaf, for it is their language of communication. The emphasis is that "tongues" is used as a metaphor for any language, which can include signed languages.²²

Biblical Understanding of the Term "Unknown"

The second area of examination is the meaning of the term "unknown." Often the interpretive adjective *hetero* (other, unknown) is added to *glossa*, emphasizing the spontaneous and evidently supernatural character of this experience.²³ The expression *beteroglossois* (other tongues) can be used to refer to recognizable, identifiable languages as well as non-recognizable, non-identifiable languages. Biblical precedent can be found for each. The same term is used both in Acts on the Day of Pentecost and in Paul's writing to the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 14:21). The words spoken at Pentecost were immediately recognized by those who heard them as being current languages, while at Corinth no one could understand what was said until someone present interpreted the language. While biblical references can be found supporting each of these possibilities, in the final analysis this question seems irrelevant. In either case, the key to understanding "unknown" is that the language has not been previously learned by the speaker.²⁴ Consequently, the unknown tongue may be an identifiable or non-identifiable language, so long as it is unknown by the speaker. Just as there are identifiable and non-identifiable spoken languages, so there are identifiable and non-identifiable signed languages. Whatever form the language may take, tongues was perceived to be a spontaneous, unlearned form of communication to God made in the Spirit.²⁵

Biblical Understanding: "The Spirit Enabled Them"

The third key to understanding this passage is the realization that the Spirit gives the ability.

The verb *apophthengomai* (enabled, gave utterance) used by Luke in Acts 2:4,14; 26:25 appears in contexts that stress clarity of communication and understanding. It is explicitly contrasted with *mainomai*, which speaks of babblings stemming from madness over which the speaker has no control.²⁶ Speaking in tongues is understood to be an activity of the Spirit in one's life; it is prayer and praise directed toward God in the language of Spirit-inspiration.²⁷ While speaking in tongues refers to the communication by means of language, it may be understood as the way of praising God that goes beyond ordinary language: it is transcendent praise. The dynamic experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit overflows in self-transcending communication glorifying God.²⁸

Biblical Understanding.- Evidential Nature of Experience

The fourth key to understanding this passage is to realize the evidential nature of this experience. It provided the evidence that the long-standing promise of Joel had been fulfilled. The Holy Spirit has been poured out in the inaugural eschatological event.²⁹ Speaking in tongues was evidence to the individuals who received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and it was evidence to the unbelievers who witnessed it. According to Acts 2:11-12, it is clear that the crowd saw evidence that something incredible had happened for "they heard them speaking in their own languages and asked, 'What does this mean?'" Again, at Caesarea, the text reads that "the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they *beard* them speaking in tongues and praising God" (10:45-46). In this passage, "speaking in tongues was the unmistakable evidence to the Jewish believers that the Caesareans had experienced Spirit baptism."³⁰ However, this "unmistakable evidence" was only possible for the hearing people who were present to hear them speaking in tongues. Any deaf people present that day would not have heard this evidence. In the case of the deaf, vocal tongues would not fulfill this evidential purpose of speaking in tongues. If this experience is to be an evidence to the deaf, then the mode of communication must be in such a manner that will be meaningful for the deaf. Deaf people are unable to confirm that tongues have occurred when tongues are vocal and not signed. Thus, if one purpose of tongues is to be an evidence, then vocal tongues would not satisfy this criteria in the case of the deaf, but signed tongues would.

Biblical Understanding. "Spoke" and "Heard"

A fifth aspect of this passage must be examined. Some would argue that because Acts says, "they *spoke* with other tongues," and "they *beard them speaking* with other tongues," that the Bible is restricting the initial evidence to verbal speaking in tongues. However, the biblical passages are not restricting deaf people from their means of communicating language; rather, it is simply recording the experience of hearing people. It must be kept in mind that the people involved were hearing, and thus a description of the incident would be logical to state that they *spoke*. That was their means of communication. What about those who do not speak? They still refer to their communication as speech. Speech does not have to be understood as literal audible words. "I hear you saying. . ." can be said even if someone is not audibly speaking. We "hear" the message that they are communicating. The Church has historically had no problem accepting the fact that not all "speech" has to be literally audible. For example, the Bible says, "If you confess with your mouth and believe in your heart you shall be saved." Many devoted deaf

Christians have never verbally confessed these words with their mouths. In a demand for the literal meaning the Church has not claimed that they are not saved. Or, what about all the deaf people who cannot literally keep the command to continually "Sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs ... ?" Do their signed praises to God not meet this command? Or, historically it has been common to allow spiritual gifts to be conducted in signed languages, even though Scripture uses the terminology to say that when one has a prophecy he should "speak" to the assembly. We have always allowed references to verbal expression to be non-literal; why should speaking in tongues be any different?

Biblical Understanding: Empowered for Service

The sixth element crucial to a proper understanding of this passage is that the result of this overwhelming experience was an empowerment for Christian service. Their lives were radically affected in their Christian life and witness. They preached and "three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41), and they proceeded to take the gospel to the uttermost ends of the earth. In the same manner, many deaf people, upon receiving the baptism with the evidence of speaking in unknown signed tongues, report considerable enthusiasm and joy upon experiencing this phenomenon. Many of them feel very strongly tied to this experience, and see it as a pivotal point in their Christian walk. They go forth to lead lives renewed in their commitment and zeal for God. It is interesting that many who practice this experience have also spoken in audible tongues, and most prefer signing.

Biblical Understanding: Baptism for All is Fulfillment of Prophecy

The seventh aspect crucial to understanding this passage is the realization that what they had experience on the Day of Pentecost was the fulfillment of what the prophet Joel had declared: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith the Lord, that I will pour out of my spirit upon *all* flesh." This prophecy poses no exclusions, but rather states that the Spirit will be poured out upon "all." Peter declares that the baptism in the Holy spirit (with the evidence of speaking in other tongues) is the fulfillment of this prophecy. Consequently, this experience of Spirit baptism with the evidence of speaking in tongues must be available for *all*, including the deaf.

From this account of the initial baptism in the Holy Spirit, it is clear that Scripture demonstrates the initial evidence of speaking in a language the speaker has never learned as the Spirit gives the ability. The purpose of speaking in tongues is to be an evidence of the infilling of the Holy Spirit, and it results in a life empowered for Christian witness and service. It has been demonstrated that the term "tongues" is not referring to a physical organ of the body but to communication of language. The mode of communication does not appear to be the key as much as that the language is previously unknown by the speaker and is conveyed by the Spirit. Thus, speaking in unknown signed tongues does not appear to be in conflict with the scriptural usage of tongues, and it also meets the criterion of being an evidence for the deaf. This understanding would seem to allow for unknown signed tongues being equivalent with unknown audible tongues, as an application of the doctrine of initial physical evidence.

This study would in no way indicate that speaking in unknown signed tongues is the only possibility for deaf people. Problems will arise if individuals say this is the only evidence of deaf people being filled with the Holy Spirit. When a deaf individual is baptized in the Holy Spirit, the initial physical evidence may be speaking in unknown signed tongues or in unknown audible tongues. The point is simply that it appears this passage by no means intends to limit the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit to an audible tongue only.

CONCLUSION

It would appear that signed glossolalia should be affirmed. It is valid historically, practically, and biblically. It has the potential to be a powerful manifestation of the Spirit for deaf people. Perhaps by this discussion, an honest question about glossolalia for the deaf can be answered. Perhaps also some deaf people themselves, who have assumed their deafness puts the Pentecostal experience beyond their reach, may be encouraged by this discussion to continue seeking this promise of God. These experiences may be signaling a time of revival among the deaf and a cause for great rejoicing. May the Church today experience the New Testament promise being fulfilled among its deaf members. May God's Spirit be poured out upon all flesh.

¹It is understood that one typically establishes a systematic theology in conversation with the broader Christian tradition. However, in this discussion there is no direct written record of this phenomenon in the NT or in the writings of the Early Church. Consequently, one must examine this issue from the perspective of biblical theology.

²James R. Goff Jr., *Fields White Unto Harvest.- Charles F Parham and the Missionary Origins of Pentecostalism* (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1988) 144- 45. For example, "though rare today, glossographia (writing in the Spirit) was a frequent claim among early Pentecostals." See also, "Pentecost Has Come: Los Angeles Being Visited by a Revival of Bible Salvation and Pentecost as Recorded in the Book of Acts," *Apostolic Faith*, Sept. 1906, provides examples of several manifestations of the Spirit, 1, col. 4.

³*Apostolic Faith*, Sept. 1906.

⁴Eldin Villafane, "Signs of Life," *TEAM* (Springfield, MO: Dec. 1968).

⁵Albert Linderman, interview by author, telephone (Minneapolis: March 29, 1993). Citing a recent retreat for ministers for the deaf in Oklahoma.

⁶Curt Humphries, interview by author, telephone (Cleveland, TN: March 30, 1993). Professor of Deaf Ministries at Lee College of the Church of God, Cleveland, TN. He states that for practical purposes, the Church of God primarily recognizes speaking in unknown audible tongues as the initial physical evidence for all, including the deaf.

⁷Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices: A journey into the World of the Deaf* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 94-95.

⁸Linderman interview.

⁹I.M. Schlesinger and Lila Namir, eds., *Sign Language of the Deaf.- Psychological, Linguistic, and Sociological Perspectives* (New York: Academic Press, 1978) 97.

¹⁰Edgar D. Lawrence, *Focus on Deafness: Selected Readings on Deafness for Paraprofessionals* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1978), 29.

¹¹Sacks, 26.

¹²P. Edward Graham, "Do The Deaf Speak In Tongues?" *Paraclete* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, Fall 1990), 22.

¹³R.P. Spittler, "Glossolalia," *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988).

¹⁴James W. Banks, "The Deaf and the Baptism in the Holy Spirit," *Conference on the Holy Spirit Digest*, vol. 1, Gwen Jones, ed. (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1983), 191.

¹⁵C.D. Linton, "Tongue," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) 870-71.

¹⁶H. Haarbeck, "Glossa" *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, Colin Brown, ed. Grand Rapids: Zondman Publishing House, 1986) 1078.

¹⁷See Jud. 7:5; Ps. 69:23; Isa. 41:17; Mark 7:33; Luke 1:64.

¹⁸Haarbeck, 1078.

¹⁹Linton, 870-71

²⁰*Ibid.*, 873.

²¹Gerhard Kittel, *Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., abridged in one volume (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 124.

²²Albert Linderman, "Speaking in Tongues in Another Signed Language," *Deaf Culture Today* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, May 1990) 2.

²³Linton, 870-71

²⁴Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament. The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987) 598.

²⁵Linton, 872.

²⁶Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981) 271.

²⁷Fee, 670

²⁸Spittler, 44

²⁹Linton, 873

³⁰Spittler, 44