

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.” (1 Cor 13:1)

‡ Lecture IV: Speaking in Tongues ‡

One of the significant developments in Christianity[†] in the twentieth century has been the rise of Charismatic and Pentecostal groupings. The term “Charismatic” derives from the Greek word *charismata* meaning gifts and particularly spiritual gifts. The related term “Pentecostal” refers to the events, which are described as having taken place on the Day of Pentecost (**Acts 2:1-12**). These movements arose mainly from within various Protestant groups but they were soon forced out because of their unusual beliefs and practices. Generally speaking these movements place unscriptural emphasis upon “signs and wonders” and “speaking in tongues.” In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, present the Orthodox perspective concerning “speaking in tongues” and “signs and wonders.”

‡ **How important are Signs & Wonders?**

- St. Paul listed the fruit of the Holy Spirit in his Epistle to the Galatians, he said, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (**Gal 5:22,23**). These virtues are more important for our salvation than signs and wonders because many have performed signs and wonders and yet lost their eternal life as our Lord said, “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (**Mt 7:22,23**)
- When the disciples rejoiced that they were performing miracles and that the demons are subject to them, our Lord said to them, “do not rejoice in this … but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven” (**Lk 10:20**)
- Moreover, pride may be associated with signs and wonders; therefore, St. Paul was given a physical infirmity lest he should be exalted by the abundance of the revelations (**2 Cor 12:7**)
- St. Paul said, “The coming of the lawless one [the antichrist] is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders …” (**2 Thess 2:9**) thus those who are seeking signs are more vulnerable to be deceived.

‡ **Speaking in Tongues in The Orthodox Perspective:**

- Speaking in tongues (Gr. *Glossologia*) is a gift of the Holy Spirit by which the ability to speak a foreign language without having to be taught it or knowing it beforehand is granted to the person. This is clear from the Holy Scripture (**Acts 2:1-13**) in which the events of Pentecost are described, and at which time this divine gift first appeared.
- The speaking of foreign languages, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, manifested itself, as a miracle, for the first time in history on the Day of Pentecost; with this divine gift the apostles began to preach in other languages (15 foreign languages) to the visitors who came to attend the feast at Jerusalem.
- The apostles were simple men of Galilee and it was impossible for them to know another language except the Aramaic they had learned at home yet the Jews of other nations, who had as their mother tongue the language of the nation in which they lived, understood everything from the divine preaching of the apostles who spoke to them with precision in their own language without needing a translator, and it is in exactly this that the miracle rests.

[†] Ironically, some of these Pentecostal groups who claim that the gifts of the Spirit flow through them do not even believe in The Holy Trinity and consequently are not worthy to be called Christians!

- Among the listeners of the preaching there were also some that did not understand anything that the apostles said and subsequently mocked them thinking that they were drunk (**Acts 2:13**). This group can be none other than the residents of Jerusalem who did not know other languages except Aramaic. For these men the preaching of the Apostles was completely unintelligible as it was prophesied, “with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people.” (**Is 28:11**)
- Thus, the residents of Jerusalem did not understand anything from the preaching, unless someone translated it for them. For just as there is the gift of speaking in tongues (foreign languages), there also exists the gift of translation. This was given when those listening were only locals ignorant of other languages, as was, for instance, the case in Corinth for St. Paul said, “if anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church ...” (**1 Cor 14:27,28**)
- The gift of translation was itself also miraculous, just as was that of speaking in foreign languages, on which it was directly dependent as St. Paul said, “unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me ... therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.” (**1 Cor 14:9**)
- The gift of speaking in foreign languages played a decisive role in evangelism and was manifested among unbelievers as a sign of the power of God as St. Paul said, “tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers” (**1 Cor 14:22**) for what meaning does it have for someone to speak about the Lord in a foreign language to someone who was taught, believed and lived his Christian faith from his childhood?
- The purpose of this gift was for the apostles to be able to spread, through preaching in foreign languages, the Christian faith to all people and to make the Holy Gospel known throughout the world. Thus, God did not give the gift of speaking in foreign tongues for all time, until the end of the world but rather for a special period of time with the aim of making it easier for unbelievers to convert to Christianity and thus St. Paul prophesied that this gift would cease (**1 Cor 13:8**).
- In addition to being given for a certain period of time in the Church, the gift of speaking foreign tongues is not a common gift for all Christians as St. Paul wonders, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” (**1 Cor 12:29,30**)
- The gift of speaking foreign tongues is not the greatest among the gifts of God. St. Paul says that there are other greater gifts of the Holy Spirit than that of speaking in tongues, “I wish that you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification” (**1 Cor 14:5**) and elsewhere he also says, “if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind?” (**1 Cor 14:23**)
- Consequently, the gifts of prophecy, preaching and interpretation of Holy Scripture are much higher than the gift of speaking in foreign tongues, for with these the believers are built up and benefit much more than with the gift of linguistics or speaking different languages. Moreover, St. Paul said, “though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal” (**1 Cor 13:1**).

- The gift of speaking in foreign languages is not associated with a state of ecstasy in which the person may speak inarticulate and incomprehensible human sounds and experience certain movements of the body such as shaking and falling on the ground, which in fact defeats the very purpose of the gift that is to communicate the Christian faith to foreign unbelievers.

❖ **In a Nutshell:**

1. The true gift of speaking in tongues is when someone speaks a language that is understood by those who hear him as mentioned in (**Acts 2:1-13**).
 2. When someone speaks a language among people who do not understand it, then another gift, the gift of translation of this language into the language of the people, is necessary. Without this translation, the foreign language is considered babbling.
 3. This gift was not given for the Church forever, but only in the beginning of Christianity in order to awaken the pagans and Jews to believe the Holy Gospel. Thus, St. Paul said that this gift would cease to exist (**1 Cor 13:8**)
 7. Not all Christians are required to receive this gift (**1 Cor 12:29,30**) and consequently it is not a sign of salvation as the Pentecostals claim.
 8. This gift is intended as a sign for unbelievers (**1 Cor 14:22**) therefore, we as believers no longer have need of this gift.
 9. From the beginning of Christianity this gift was considered among the lesser gifts in the Church, while the others, such as that of prophecy, interpretation of Holy Scriptures, love and the rest, were much greater.
 10. It is totally out of the question for speaking in tongues, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, to mean a delirium in a non-existent and incomprehensible language for this comes into clear contradiction with the Holy Book of Acts and brings to memory the convulsive ways of idol worshiper.
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* This lecture is adapted from “*Comparative Theology*” by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.