

Is Speaking in Tongues Real Today? An African Christian Perspective

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Abstract

The emergence of global Pentecostalism and Charismatism brought a great deal of sensationalism and emotionalism into the practice of Christianity in Ghana and Africa in general. This led to the stressing of speaking in tongues as evidence of the filling with the Holy Spirit. This doctrine of evidence resonates with Pentecostal theology of continuation of charismata that the experience of the apostles and their lieutenants on the Day of Pentecost is and should be the norm for Christians of all generations. As such, there is a strong notion among Pentecostal and charismatic Christians that speaking in tongues is real in the sub-apostolic church. This paper, in disagreement with the Pentecostal and charismatic claims on charismata argues that the gift of tongues ceased with the death of the last apostle. This argument hinges on B.B. Warfield's theory on charismata that the extra-ordinary gifts such as prophecy, healing, exorcism, visions, speaking in tongues and miracles in general were never the possession of all Christians. This article thus eviscerates the major argument for Charismatic claims on tongues. Therefore, the central argument of this paper is that tongue speaking is not real today.

Introduction

One would agree with me that the subject matter of this paper is one of the most hotly debated issues in ecclesiastical history and with the emergence of global Pentecostalism, it continues to more and more engage the attention of laity and clergy of the church; as well as scholars of religion. One would also realise that the phenomenon of tongue is one particular doctrine that theologians of both the southern and northern hemispheres, with varied denominational and doctrinal backgrounds are divided over and continue to grapple with.

In Ghana and Africa for that matter, religious fundamentalism is dramatically and dangerously rising with religious dogma incontrovertibly serving as a bolster for doctrinal distortions. Thus during the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, Christianity in Ghana underwent dramatic, and often, violent transformation, with Charismatism claiming the centre stage. Scholarly debates in recent times are touting charismatism as the New Reformation and authentic Christianity in Africa. Yet, in my assessment, charismatic practices in Ghana are clear cases of misuse of the Bible with serious soteriological and ecclesiological concerns. In this regard, the paper observes that following the emergence of global Pentecostalism, Christians who profess to be Pentecostal or charismatic generally nurture the notion that speaking in a tongue was not restricted to the apostolic church and that there is an indication of the genuineness of tongues throughout the existence of the church and it would continue until the second coming of Christ; the Parousia. For such Christians, speaking in strange and unintelligible language is evidence that one had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Biblical passages being used to support the foregoing claim include Joel 2:28-32, Mark 16:14-18, Acts 2:1-4, Acts 10:44-46 and 1 Cor. 12: 1-11. In the Acts 2 episode, the text confirms that the people spoke in tongues or languages that were understood i.e., Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. For a definition, “tongues” *glóssa* in the Greek means “languages”. So clearly, tongues in the New Testament church were tongues of known languages. This is what we call in Pentecostal and Charismatic studies *Xenoglossy or Xenoglossia*; and not *Glossolalia* which is unknown language or unintelligible sound as is being experienced in the church in Ghana and elsewhere today. According to Walvoord and Zack (1984), since many in Judea were bilingual and some even trilingual, it is not really that surprising that there were many languages being spoken. For Walvoord and Zuck, the people who gathered on the Day of Pentecost were only praising God in different languages to give evidence for unbelievers that God was at work in more ethnic groups than just the Jews. In addition, the Pentecost event validated the fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32 as outlined in the sermon preached by Peter (Acts 2:14-21).

Biblical antecedence of tongues

Speaking in tongues was first recorded in Acts 2:4. Before his ascension into the clouds, Jesus commanded the apostles to remain in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes to fill them with power from heaven (Luke 24:49). In fulfillment of this promise, on the Day of Pentecost, flames of fire descended on the multitude of people from all walks of life who gathered in Jerusalem under the auspices of the apostles and as a result of their filling with the Holy Spirit, they reportedly spoke in tongues or other languages. Thus, against the background of this Pentecost experience, speaking in tongues became an integral part of modern Pentecostal and charismatic practices; both within Penteco-charismatic and mainline churches; be it Catholic or Protestant. The term Pentecost is derived from the Greek *pentē-kostē*. It literally means “fiftieth”. In New Testament theology, Pentecost or Day of Pentecost is 50 days after the resurrection of Christ when the Holy Spirit came to the church (Acts 2). The concept of Pentecost however traces its historical antecedent to the Jewish Festival of Weeks (Exodus 23:14-17) which is celebrated 50 days after the Passover to present the first fruits of the harvest to God. On the calendar of the historic church, the feast or festival of Pentecost is observed on the 7th Sunday or fiftieth day after Easter each year to commemorate the descent of the Holy Spirit.

Speaking in tongues in the sub-apostolic church

The question this paper seeks to grapple with is “Is speaking in tongues real today?” In answering this question Green (1975) argues that there is enough proof in church history to suggest that there is continuity of tongues in the church from the time of the apostles to the present era. Deere (2006) re-enforces this argument that it is simply not the case that there are no real or genuine tongues today. Basing his assertion on 1 Cor. 14, Omenyo (2006) maintains that both real and fake tongues can be found in the church today. Similarly, Grudem (1991) suggests that tongues are meant for believers of all ages. So, on the whole, we are persuaded by the foregoing scholars and a host of others not mentioned here that speaking in a tongue is a gift to some selected Christians of all times.

On the contrary, B.B. Warfield (1918), on the other hand, staunchly rejected outright the idea that tongues are operational outside the early church. Thus Warfield drawing on Calvin and Luther popularised the view that the ability to perform signs and wonders has been a gift to the

apostles only to register them as credible agents of Christ for mission. Warfield goes on to argue that no one else had the power to transmit any of the gifts including the gift of tongue apart from the apostles even if they possessed one through the hands of the apostles.

Having analysed Warfield's objection against continuation of charismata, I want to quickly submit that the death of the last apostle (John) marked the end of the gift of tongue. Omenyo (2006) confirms this submission that the cessation of the charismata theory was the main position of the constituted Church by the end of the 4th century. He goes on to say that Augustine and Chrysostom were familiar with cessationism because Hyppolytus who was a contemporary of Tertullian has been the first of the Fathers to articulate the viewpoint.

So, there is no denying of the fact that the early church was very much aware of the withdrawal of the gift of signs and tongues. We have established this from the lamentations of the Fathers about the loss of power and authority in the church with the passing away of the generation that received them but could not pass them on. For example, in Homily 46 on Matthew's gospel, Chrysostom "mistakenly" compared the church of his era to those early days of the apostles and wondered why it was achieving so little by way of growth. He nonetheless concluded (rightly) that while the apostolic church enjoyed miraculous powers, the later church did not Bansah (2013).

Having said this let me not ignore the greatest of all the reformers in the history of the Christian church. By insisting on the integral relation between Word and Spirit, Luther confines the historical-biblical experience of tongues, fire, and wind to the apostolic period. He elaborates that tongues spoken on the Day of Pentecost was only a symbolic indication that the good news must be proclaimed in all languages. Karkkainen (2002) and Bansah (2013) pinpoint the fact that the uncompromising role Luther played in translating the Scriptures from Latin into German at the time it was confined to Rome and the Papacy to make it accessible to Christians of all languages depicts the strength of his theology on speaking in tongues.

Theological reflection

Using Mark 16:15-18 to argue for the existence of tongues beyond the early church in my view is misleading. This is because the longer ending of Mark's gospel is still debatable among biblical scholars. Speculations are ripe that verses 9 to 20 were not included in the original manuscript and due to the fact that this pericope is missing from some of the old and reliable Greek manuscripts such as the Sinaiticus and the Vaticanus as well as the numerous early Latin, Syriac, Armenian and Georgian manuscripts, it has to read with uttermost suspicion.

According to ESV (2008) commentary on the aforementioned Markan text, its insertion into the later manuscripts is nonetheless suspicious, especially when Origen, Eusebius, Jerome and Clement of Alexandria have all noted that almost all the Greek manuscripts available to them by the 4th century lacked vv. 9–20. The commentary further maintains that Eusebius and Jerome stated that this section of Mark's gospel is missing in most manuscripts they read although they were aware that other endings existed. In the 2nd century, Justin Martyr and Tatian knew about other endings. Irenaeus (150–200 A.D.) must have known about this long ending because he quoted verse 19 from it in his *Against Heresies* in 177A.D. This suggests that the longer ending

was in existence at this time and was considered canonical, at least by Irenaeus. Similarly, traditions of the post-early church speculate that early church fathers such as Tertullian, Hippolytus, Ambrose and Augustine have all cited from this long ending. So, one can argue that the early church fathers knew of the added verses. But Eusebius, a Roman church historian maintains that the original Greek manuscripts did not contain the longer ending. This confirms the ESV commentary that there are Greek words and expressions in the text that are uncommon to Mark with stylistic differences.

In the light of the above, one can argue that Mark 16:9-20 is a later addition to the gospel of Mark from an unknown source. Traditions of the post early church and the fathers suggest that the longer ending (verses 9-20) was inserted around the 2nd century possibly before the closure of the universally constituted and accepted canon of the Bible at the 3rd Council of Carthage on 28th August 397 A.D. Nonetheless, even though textual critics theorise that the passage was a 2nd century scribal attempt to supply a proper finishing to the otherwise rather abrupt ending (v. 8) of the chronologically second gospel, a medieval source ascribes it to Ariston, an elder in the church who traditions hold that Papias (an Apostolic Father and Bishop of Hierapolis c. 70-163 A.D.) calls a disciple of the Lord. As such, relying on the longer ending of the gospel of Mark to argue for the existence of tongues beyond the apostolic church is grossly questionable. But assuming one wants to play the devil's advocate here that the disputed portion of Mark is genuinely Jesus' words, one would still say that it is only an apostolic authority of signs and wonders for the sending of the gospel to the Jews who demanded signs (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22; 14:21 and Is. 28:11). Better still, biblical scholars such as Walvoord and Zuck (1984) for instance agree that taking into serious consideration the import of Acts 19:1-7, tongues were intended to overcome unbelief in the listeners of the gospel and that they were specifically meant to validate God's message of salvation to the unbelieving Gentiles and Jews alike (cf. Acts 10:44-46, 1 Cor. 14:22). One therefore concurs with Robertson (1993) that it is a false claim that signs such as tongues follow the preaching of the gospel today.

In the same vein, the list of the gifts of the Spirit in 1Cor. 12:1-11 was for Christian worship in the apostolic age (cf. 1 Cor. 14: 26-40). This ought to be understood in context and not to be taken or mistaken to be for the church of all times. 1 Cor. 13:8-9 confirms this that among other things tongues will cease at the coming of perfection being the completion of the canon of the Bible. Some Christians, especially within Pentecostal and charismatic circles however interpret or misinterpret the coming of perfection as the second coming of Christ. But this later view ought to be rejected considering Paul's warning that of all the gifts exhibited in the apostolic church, only three of them will not terminate. He outlines them as faith, hope and love; which are referred to in Christian Social Ethics as the "Three Theological Virtues" (1 Cor. 13:13).

To substantiate the forgoing, one would want to allude to the story involving Philip and Simon the magician (also known as Magus) in Acts 8:4-24 to prove that only the apostles themselves could pass on genuine charismata and that the recipients were powerless and unable to pass them onto others in turn. Thus the paper seeks to suggest that the gift tongue ceased at the death of the last apostle (John) around 150/160 A.D. If one wants to stretch the argument further, then one would say that assuming the extreme scenario where John, at his final days may have laid hands upon a young person of about twenty years old, and supposing that this man lived perhaps to the

ripe age of eighty or even more, then of course, we may make the case for the cessation of the gift of tongues slightly before or after 155 A.D. (Bansah 2013). I am making this claim based on my earlier submission that a beneficiary of any of the apostolic gifts was incapable of passing them onto a third party and Paul's experience on his third missionary journey to Ephesus alludes to the fact that only by the laying off of the hands a true apostle that unbelievers can receive the gift of tongues (Acts 19:1-7). Therefore, modern claim to tongues is delusional, counterfeit, error, confusion, distortion, heresy and the denial of the Good Book.

Conclusion

This paper establishes that recent global Pentecostal experiences have brought a great deal of sensationalism and emotionalism into the practice of Christianity especially in Africa. This led to the stressing of speaking in tongues as evidence of the filling with the Holy Spirit. In conclusion, the paper stresses that the gift of tongues ceased with the death of the last apostle and the closure of the Christian canon of Scripture. Therefore, speaking in a tongue is not real today. As such, Ghanaian/African Christians should be encouraged and persuaded with the genuine and unadulterated Word of God to desire the perpetual and unending virtuous gifts of the Spirit namely, Faith, hope and love towards the edification of the church and her members.

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