

The Pentecostal Movement's view of the continuity of tongues in Acts and 1 Corinthians



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Pentecostals see a continuity between the speaking in languages as a part of the filling or baptism with the Spirit in Acts 2 and the other four incidents in Acts (8, 9, 10, 19). This is also the case of the phenomenon described in 1 Corinthians 12–14, and their own experience, in contradistinction to most Protestants who regard the gift of tongues in terms of Acts 2's description. It is described as the miraculous ability to speak in real foreign languages with the purpose to reach people from different nationalities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this article the pentecostal claim of continuity between the speaking in languages in Acts and Corinthians and our own day is being analysed and criticised. The position poses several questions that need to be addressed, like the seeming and presumed discontinuity between languages in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians, with the modern pentecostal phenomenon of speaking in languages related to what happened in 1 Corinthians and not in Acts. The implication is that a difference exists between the languages used by the Galileans on the Day of Pentecost and the phenomenon of languages occurring in the Corinthian assembly – with the Corinthian assembly associated with the modern charismatic movement. This poses the question whether a differentiation between speaking in languages in Acts and the phenomenon designated with the same term in 1 Corinthians is sustainable; also whether the identification of modern Pentecostals with the Corinthian phenomenon is allowed.

Introduction

Pentecostals consider the events on the Day of Pentecost (Ac 2) as repeatable in terms of the promise that the gift of the Spirit was for the attendees and their offspring (Ac 2:39) as part of their hermeneutics that reads Acts as a model for the church today (Menzies 2016:2). They argue that speaking in tongues serves as precedent and archetype of Spirit baptism (Mittelstadt 2010:71) but also as repeatable evidence of the Holy Spirit's continued presence (Synan 1994:75).¹ However, they (are forced to) allow that there is a significant difference between the original experience on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 where the respective languages are recognised by people of different regions (*xenolalia*)² and the separate gift of languages described in 1 Corinthians 12–14, and which according to 1 Corinthians 14:13 needs a further gift, namely the gift of interpretation (gift regions; Thiselton 2000:970 translates it as 'intelligible articulation of tongues-speech') to make sense (*glossolalia*) (Lockwood 2000:435; Warrington 2008:93). They believe that the Corinthian experience of speaking in languages is consistent with modern pentecostal believers' experience of Spirit baptism (Thiselton 2000:970–988; Busenitz 2014:65–69) and they posit a continuity between Acts, Corinthians, and the contemporary charismatic experiences of speaking in tongues.³ Horton (2005) posits:

The parallels between Acts and 1 Corinthians 14 indicate that the gift is the same in form as the evidence of Acts; however, the purpose of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12 is a gift used in the church and needing interpretation to bring edification. (p. 223)

This was not always the case. Initially pentecostal believers in the earliest days of the movement identified themselves as the restoration of the Acts 2 church and considered their experience of speaking in languages as a supernatural impartation of power that allows the gifted person,

1. Acts 2:3 uses the strange term, 'tongues like fire' (γλῶσσαι ὡσεὶ πυρὸς), that does not occur in the rest of the Bible. An interesting intertextual reference is found in the third century bce non-canonical work 1 Enoch 14:15, where Enoch sees in a vision a second house 'built with tongues of fire' (tr. G.H. Schodde 1882:3).

2. Menzies (2016:3) acknowledges that Acts 2:4 is 'probably' the only instance in the New Testament where speaking in tongues is manifest in *xenolalia*, i.e. the miraculous, spontaneous ability to speak a previously unknown language.

3. Thiselton (2000:970–988) gives a detailed overview of various views of the nature of tongues based on exegetical and contextual grounds: tongues as angelic speech; tongues as the miraculous power to speak other languages; tongues as liturgical, archaic, or rhythmic phrases; tongues as ecstatic speech; tongues as the language of the unconscious which becomes capable of consciousness through interpretation; and tongues as language of the unconscious released in 'sighs too deep for words' (from the depths of the heart). Glossolalia makes unconscious depth dimensions of life accessible, which may involve reassumptions of a more primitive level of speaking to which one regresses at times, as a return to egocentric use of language (Theissen 2007:306, 312–313).

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equipped in this way with an unknown existing language, to evangelise the world without the difficulty of laboriously learning the languages needed to reach the lost (Synan 1997:4). This was the kind of language utilised by early pentecostals, that God gives believers the ability to speak in languages which they had not learned, with the purpose to bring in the harvest of the last days, as happened at Pentecost (McGee 2006:100; 2007:1).⁴ The anticipated proclamation in different tongues, however, soon disappointed the earliest missionaries on mission fields when nobody understood their 'Spirit tongues', and early Pentecostals had to look again at what the New Testament teaches. They found this time that these tongues serve as a useful way to praise and worship God, as a prayer language (Anderson 1979:89–92; Busenitz 2014:69–83; McGee 2007:1; Synan 1997:89–92, 101–102; Wacker 1999:44–49). Little is recorded about this failure, leading the well-known British pentecostal leader, Donald Gee (1949:11–19), to deduce that it represents a chapter in the history of the early Pentecostal church that they would like to forget.

Speaking in tongues do play an important role in the Pentecostal Movement in order to sensitise the believer to the promptings of the Spirit, to give confidence to witness, and provide power to live a holy life (in the language of pioneers like Taylor [1907:128] and Haywood [1908:3]).⁵ However, it is argued here that the claim that the events during the Day of Pentecost should be repeated and replicated in the modern church, is only valid if the tongues of Acts 2 can be proved to be identical with the tongues in 1 Corinthians 12–14 and contemporary experience. However, if speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians refers to another, respective experience that matches that of the contemporary Pentecostal Movement's experience of Spirit baptism, then it is evident that continuity cannot be claimed between Acts, Corinthians, and the contemporary experience. For this reason protestant cessationists define the New Testament gift of tongues consequently as the miraculous ability given by the Spirit to speak fluently in genuine foreign languages that were previously unknown to the speaker, as a witness to Jesus Christ. This is contrasted to the malediction found in Genesis 11:1–9 when all people united, speaking the same language and planning to do the impossible, and YHWH confused them with different languages in order that they would not be able to understand each other (e.g. Edgar 1996:120–164; Smith 1973; Thomas 1999:186).

At the outset, the difficulty in verbalising spiritual experiences and comparing it with historical instances must be emphasised. The pentecostal argument for continuity between its experience of speaking in tongues and the events on the Day of Pentecost,

4. 'The baptism with the Holy Ghost is a gift of power upon the sanctified life', Seymour (1906:1) says. By 1915 William Seymour, leading the Azusa Street Mission, had changed his position on tongues as the Bible evidence for being baptised in the Spirit. This reflected his frustration at the failure of receiving the gift of tongues to transform the receiver's life in the long term. 'While tongues is one of the signs that follows God's Spirit-filled children, they will have to know the truth and do the truth', Seymour postulates, quoted in Martin (ed. 2000:81). Speaking in tongues is not the real evidence, Seymour argued; the life of the Spirit-filled tongue-speaker is measured with the fruits of the Spirit.

5. Unfortunately Johns (2007:93) is correct that speaking in tongues does encourage some Pentecostals to believe that they have special powers and their faith is superior to those of other Christians.

other descriptions of filling with the Spirit in Acts, and the phenomenon of speaking in languages in Corinth are hampered by two difficulties. The first is the inherent difficulty in describing spiritual experiences with its affectional perspective, and in linking the experiences of one individual with that of another due to the uncomparability of subjective individual experiences. The second difficulty consists in finding appropriate words to describe the intimate experiences of the individual. Pentecostals react to the last difficulty by explaining that they use the words utilised in the New Testament to describe their spiritual experiences, including 'speaking in tongues'. Placing historical and contemporary descriptions of spiritual experiences next to each other in an undifferentiated form, in methodological terms, requires careful consideration (Lombaard 2011:211–225). Another factor is that there is no means whereby (ancient) literary and experiential expressions of spirituality can be compared with each other because of its subjectivity per se as well as differences in worldview, language, culture, and personal differences (Lombaard 2015:93).

This article looks critically at Pentecostals' arguments that continuity exists between the experiences of speaking in tongues in Acts 2, 1 Corinthians, and those experienced by contemporary tongues speakers in the pentecostal fray.

Pentecostal arguments for continuity between tongues in the New Testament and the Pentecostal Movement

Pentecostals allow that modern tongues⁶ may as an exception consist of translatable foreign languages as in Acts 2 (Keener 2005:113). They, however, emphasise that speaking in tongues primarily consists of incomprehensible speech of a mysterious nature and content, a 'quasi-language' that allows God and the believer to communicate (Grudem 2011:246; Warrington 2008:87). Their view is based primarily on 1 Corinthians 14:2, namely that speaking in languages allows one to speak to God and that people would not understand the communication because through the Spirit the speech represents a mystery (ὁ γὰρ λαλῶν γλώσση οὐκ ἀνθρώποις λαλεῖ ἀλλὰ θεῷ, οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἀκούει, πνεύματι δὲ λαλεῖ μυστήρια – 'for one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God, for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit'). However, they do not discuss the difference between the languages described in Acts and those of Corinthians, and while they link their charismatic experience to the Corinthians, they do not justify the difference of the Corinthian languages and their own languages with the Acts 2 description of languages.

The key to Acts 2's languages is found in verse 11, when those present say they hear them speaking in their own

6. Greek *glossa* (γλῶσσα) refers to the physical tongue but also to 'language'. 'Speaking in tongues' should thus probably rather be translated as 'speaking in languages' because of the strangeness of the idiom, 'speaking in tongues', as Grudem (1994:1069) argues. Thiselton (2000:970 Full bibliographical detail please) argues that it should be translated as 'species, kinds, or sorts of tongues'.

languages about the great things of God (ἀκούομεν λαλούντων αὐτῶν ταῖς ἡμετέραις γλώσσαις τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ – ‘we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God’). It seems that the phenomenon represents authentic foreign languages previously unknown to the speakers, who were illiterate Galileans (Οὐχ ἰδοὺ πάντες οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ λαλοῦντες Γαλιλαῖοι – ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?’).⁷ Pentecostals’ experience cannot, however, be identified with this event although they view their charismatic experience of speaking in tongues as a modern corollary of the experience on the Day of Pentecost.

Modern Pentecostals rather identify their experience of speaking in languages with the Corinthian phenomenon and call it heavenly languages, ecstatic languages, angelic languages, or prayer languages (Stibbe 1997:156).⁸ They assume that the earliest church naturally accepted that *glossolalia* was a normal, frequent, and expected part of believers’ experience and that it coincided with the Corinthian experience (Menzies 2016:38), as is the case in the contemporary Pentecostal Movement.

Horton (2005:185) argues that what was happening in Corinth is exactly parallel to what happened on the Day of Pentecost. He provides several reasons for his argument. At Pentecost, the crowd initially was amazed at the strange phenomenon, but no one was saved by the speaking in tongues. Some ascribed it to wine (Ac 2:13: Γλέυκους μεμεστωμένοι εἰσίν – ‘they have had too much [sweet, very intoxicating] wine’). In the same sense, Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 14:27 that in the ordinary gathering where people of various languages are not present, the purpose and use of tongues is somewhat restricted. A second argument has to do with some translators translating λαλεῖν ἑτέραις γλώσσαις with ‘speaking in foreign languages’ in Acts but with ‘speaking ecstatically’ or ‘speaking with strange sounds’ in Corinthians. Horton (2005:186) responds that the spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets (1 Cor 14:32), implying that there is no evidence that the Corinthians were speaking in ecstasy in the sense of being in a trance. A third argument is that the gift of prophecy is not a (supernatural) sign to the unbeliever (1 Cor 14:22) but to the believer. ‘Sign’ refers in the New Testament to a miracle; because prophecy is in an existing language understood by the believer; it is not seen as obviously supernatural. The unbeliever must be able to understand what the Spirit is saying, explaining why on the Day of Pentecost unbelievers heard the message in an understandable medium (Ac 2:11: ἀκούομεν λαλούντων αὐτῶν ταῖς ἡμετέραις γλώσσαις τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ – ‘we hear them

telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God’). And Peter did not give his own reasoning or thoughts but spoke as the Spirit enabled him, in prophecy and not in tongues (Horton 2005:186). A fourth reason that demonstrates the continuity between Acts and Corinthians is that the new church did not devote all their time speaking in tongues, but rather to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Ac 2:42). The word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied (Ac 6:7). Paul recognises that a variety of expression is normal. When believers gather, usually in a home, one may sing a psalm (probably from the Book of Psalms) under the anointing of the Spirit; another may teach a doctrine, a Spirit-illuminated instruction from God’s Word; another brings a revelation, such as a message of wisdom or a message of knowledge; and another brings a tongue with someone else providing an interpretation (using Horton’s 2005:186–187 translation of 1 Cor 14:26). There is no fixed order of service in this picture of a New Testament gathering (Beyschlag 1995:247).

This is in contradistinction to other Protestants who regarded the gift of languages as the miraculous ability to speak real foreign languages, that allowed the early Christians to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to people of different nationalities without studying their languages (cf. MacArthur 2013:252–261 for references from the Reformers).⁹ At the end of the apostolic age this gift was not necessary anymore because the *oikoumene* had been reached with the gospel. Early believers also received the ability to understand these languages as another gift of the Spirit (διὰ τοῦ πνεύματος διδοται), as 1 Corinthians 12:10 explains.

The forerunner of the Pentecostal Movement, Charles F. Parham, shared this last view (Parham 2006 [1902]:32; see also Jacobsen 2003:32). He was of the opinion that the tongues experienced in his Bible School in Topeka, Kansas were real languages (*xenolalia*), previously unknown to the recipient (Parham 1977:53–54). He did not make the distinction between tongues as a sign of the baptism of the Spirit and tongues as a spiritual gift, as later Pentecostals would do (ed. Jacobsen 2006:32). As in the case of the languages given to the apostles in Acts 2, the purpose was to evangelise people from different languages. Spirit-filled recipients need only to identify their language as an affirmation of God’s call and then move to the relevant mission field, was Parham’s advice to his students (Goff 1988:73–74). In this way, Agnes Ozman supposedly started speaking in Chinese and did not regain her ability to speak in English for three days (Chandomba 2007:15–17; Goff 1988:67; Synan 1997:89–92). Parham (1901) declares:

I have no doubt various dialects of the people of India and even the language of the savages of Africa will be received during our meetings in the same way. (p. 10)

However, as explained, it soon dawned on the early Pentecostals that their languages did not resemble genuine

7.The miracle of speaking in languages on the Day of Pentecost has been explained in two ways, as a miracle of speaking (where illiterate Galileans use languages they have not learned while people from different parts of the world hear them speaking in their own dialects), or a miracle of hearing (where illiterate Galileans speak in their own language and the Spirit works in the minds of listeners from different parts of the world to understand their language by interpreting it for them in an immediate way) (Brumback 1947:48–48; Möller 1975:97–98). However, Acts 2 does not warrant the second way of explaining, the miracle of people hearing the Galileans speaking about the great deeds of God (Ac 2:11).

8.Catholic charismatic scholars investigated the continuity of speaking in tongues throughout church history, a subject neglected by pentecostal scholars, and concluded that the Early Church remained strongly charismatic through the end of the second century and maintained sporadic charismatic impulses into the third century and beyond (cf. Kydd 1984; McDonnell 1980; McDonnell & Montague 1991).

9.To name some of the more important references: Bock (2007:188); Calvin (1965:236; 1972:III:254); Kuyper (1941:189); Luther (1949:150–172; 1959a:173–174; 1959b:144); MacArthur (2013:252–261); Müller (1964:105); Van der Walt (1961:95–96); Warfield (1953:6).

foreign languages, although a few incidents were reported that it purportedly happened that speakers were able to use foreign languages unknown to them (Wood 2014), although it seems rather unconvincing (Carson 1987:84).

This raises several questions, whether the Protestants are correct in their assertion that speaking in tongues refers to the supernatural ability to speak in existing foreign languages previously unknown to the speaker, or whether the Pentecostals are correct in their assertion that the gift of languages refers to noncognitive (spiritual) languages, and whether continuity may be asserted between Acts's charismatic languages, Corinthian languages, and contemporary pentecostal languages.

Pentecostal scholars have formulated various forms of the argument for continuity and it can be constructed as follows.

The difference between tongues in Acts 2 and the tongues in 1 Corinthians

Most scholars accept that Acts 2's languages refer to genuine foreign languages (ἡμετέρας γλώσσας; Chance 2007:49; Schnabel 2012:115), breaking down, for the moment at least, the barrier of human languages as the essence of the curse of Babel (Shuman 1996:71–72; Thomas 2011:30–31).¹⁰ At the same time they accept that the Corinthian *languages* refer to a different category of languages.

However, Pentecostals implicitly accept that the same basic phenomenon is being described in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12–14 without explaining the categorical difference of the languages in Acts 2 as known dialects while *speaking in languages* in 1 Corinthians refers to unintelligible utterances. They accept that what happened on the Day of Pentecost was the 'type scene pattern', making tongues important to all of the subsequent scenes (language employed by Edwards 1984:20; cf. Ac 10:44–47; 19:1–7). Edwards concludes that it is reasonable to accept that the symbolic importance of tongues in the anchor archetype-scene serves as implied evidence for the baptism in the Spirit or as archetypical behaviour (Railey 2007:43), even if one of the other descriptions of Spirit

baptism in Acts does not feature speaking in languages explicitly (as in Ac 8; Chuen 1993:195–204; Graves 1984:6).¹¹

Pentecostals base their argument on several premises. They argue that 1 Corinthians refers to unintelligible utterances or *glossolalia*, as experienced in contemporary pentecostal churches, because these languages must be interpreted if they are to be understood (1 Cor 14:6–19, 28; cf. 12:10, 30). Menzies (2016:8) argues that since Paul does not entertain the possibility that someone with a knowledge of the particular tongue being spoken might be present and thus be able to interpret, it is evident that intelligible human languages are not in view at this point. However, that is not so evident if the claim is not accepted that the languages refer to unintelligible, nonhuman languages. Peter, according to Acts 11:17, testifies that God gave Cornelius and his household 'the same gift as he gave us' (ἴσθιν δωρεάν ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς ὡς καὶ ἡμῖν – 'if then God gave the same gift to them as He gave to us'), indicating a close link in Peter's mind between the languages in Acts 2 and Acts 11.¹²

Another premise is that Acts 10:46 and 19:6 use the same phrase (λαλοῦντων γλώσσας – 'hearing them speaking in tongues') to designate utterances inspired by the Spirit, showing a literary parallel with 1 Corinthians' use of the term. Again, the same term is used in Acts 2:4 (λαλεῖν ἑτέρας γλώσσας – 'to speak in other tongues'). It is a valid question, to which do the references in Acts 10 and 19 refer, to the languages that Acts 2 speaks of, or the (supposed) languages in 1 Corinthians?

Another argument is that unbelievers observing speaking in languages reacted the same way in Acts 2:13, when they accused the apostles of being drunk, and 1 Corinthians 14:23, when they accused the Corinthian believers of acting in an insane manner. In other words, bystanders did not understand the languages or what they represent, mocking the tongue-speakers.

10. Pentecostal scholars have an ongoing debate about the purposes of Spirit baptism.

An interesting perspective on tongues is found in Macchia's (2006:45) remark that Babel represents humanity's failure to design a homogenous and centralised security, leading to the confusion of languages and scattering of peoples. In Acts, Luke focuses upon the scattering of the peoples through the world as a reversed-providential fulfilment. Now followers of Christ scatter across the face of the earth to carry the message that humans can encounter God (Ac 17:26–27) to serve the symbolic significance of the remarkable linguistic miracle of speaking in languages, to cross every linguistic and cultural barrier in the church's quest to bear bold witness for Jesus to the ends of the world (Macchia 2016:4). At Babel, God destroyed the oppressive, monolithic unity; on the Day of Pentecost He created the potential for a higher and more differentiated unity in diversity. Pentecost thus serves as protest against domestication of the gospel to a single idiom or culture (Macchia 2006:43). Everts (1993:9) concurs when she understands *speaking in languages* as the new spiritual language of the new community created by the Spirit when He removed long existing social, cultural, national and linguistic barriers, allowing Jews, Gentiles, and followers of John the Baptist (Ac 19) to become one community of faith. Shuman (1996:95–96) argues in this context that *glossolalia* symbolises new possibilities for social and political relationships in stark contrast to Babel-like violence. The import of *glossolalia* must not be restricted to utterance; it is rather a community whose memory of its Savior creates the miracle of being a people whose very differences contribute to their unity. Mittelstadt (2010:73–77) gives a summary of the debate and concludes that an early consensus shows that the purposes of tongues speech are that it breaks down barriers between people, protests racism, models a culturally diverse yet is a common witness to the gospel, presents a transformative experience, and provides empowerment for witness.

11. Not all Pentecostals agree that speaking in languages serves as evidence of Spirit baptism. The first recorded controversy occurred in 1918 when Fred Francis Bosworth (2006 [1917]:137–149) presented his viewpoint that *speaking in languages* points to one of many possible indications of Spirit baptism; leading in reaction to the motion at the meeting of the General Council of the Assemblies of God in 1918 that in every case of Spirit baptism in Acts, recipients did speak in tongues and that it serves as full consummation of the baptism in the Spirit (Mittelstadt 2010:34–35); alienating Bosworth from the Assemblies of God.

12. Continuationists argue that both passages, Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians, use the same terminology, employing combinations of λαλέω (to speak) and γλώσσα (tongue, or language) in order to describe what is supposed to be the same phenomenon (Ac 2:4, 11; 1 Cor 12:10, 28; 13:1, 8; 14:2, 4, 5, 9, 13, 18, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27, 39; Ac 10:46; 19:6). No evidence exists that γλώσσα was ever used to refer to ecstatic, unintelligible speech (Edgar 1996:126, 130). Further, it is at least probable that Luke describes Pentecost in the same terms as Paul only when he is of the opinion that what happened in Acts was the same as the Corinthian experience. Luke wrote his two-volume work five to ten years later than 1 Corinthians, and Luke and Paul were closely related and probably worked together (cf. the 'our' references in the last part of Acts). Both passages associate *speaking in languages* with foreign languages; Acts 2 refers to a list of these languages in verses 9–11 and derives 'other tongues' (ἑτέρας γλώσσας) from Isaiah 28:11 (used in singular), while 1 Corinthians 14:21 also refers to Isaiah 28:11, making it probable that Paul was thinking of foreign languages. In both cases the languages spoken were translatable, even though, in the case of the pilgrims visiting Jerusalem in Acts 2:8–11, they followed the words spoken in their mother language, while in Corinth an interpreter was needed. 'To interpret' (διερμηνευτής in 1 Cor 14:28) refers to 'translate from one language to another' and can be translated as either 'interpreting' or 'translating' (Lockwood 2000:436). That the languages referred to in 1 Corinthians 12–14 need to be translated or interpreted imply that they are meaningful languages but that does not mean that it should necessarily be human languages; Pentecostals accept that there are heavenly languages that would need to be translated when spoken among humans.

Lastly, both passages draw a close parallel between speaking in tongues and prophecy (Ac 2:17; 19:6; 1 Cor 12:10; 13:1–2, 8; 14). If prophecy refers to the same phenomenon in Acts and 1 Corinthians, it is probable that speaking in languages also refers to the same phenomenon in both passages. Gromacki (1972:136) adds that the goal of the phenomenon of languages in Acts and Corinthians is to magnify God, both were spoken by believers under the inspiration and control of the Spirit, and both had significance as signs.

However, it can be argued that the parallel that Pentecostals see between Spirit baptism in Acts and 1 Corinthians is in essence suspended if it is accepted that the phenomenon of languages of Acts 2 differs from the languages in 1 Corinthians 12–14. Pentecostals need to rethink the link because languages as the sign of Spirit baptism in Acts 2 do not correspond to what they experience as speaking in languages, in imitation of 1 Corinthians 12–14. This does not mean that the charismatic experience of speaking in languages is disputed as such, only that a discontinuity between the experience in Acts, Corinthians, and the contemporary church poses a question to Pentecostals' restorationist claim that Acts 2 is perpetuated in their experience.

The tongues in 1 Corinthians refer to non-human languages in order to facilitate direct spiritual communication with God

Pentecostals view 1 Corinthians 14:2 as a key to interpret what they experience as the gift of languages, that whoever speaks in a language does not speak to humankind but to God, for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit (or: spiritual mysteries; ὁ γὰρ λαλῶν γλώσση οὐκ ἀνθρώποις λαλεῖ ἀλλὰ θεῷ, οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἀκούει, πνεύματι δὲ λαλεῖ μυστήρια – 'for one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God, for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit'). The argument is: if speaking in languages always refers to known human languages, how could Paul state categorically that no one understands it? The second conjunction (γὰρ) supposedly connects the phrase 'does not speak to men but to God' to 'for no one understands', indicating that the first phrase is explained by the second. The context of verse 2 is the meeting of the local congregation (Edgar 1996:140), and the contrast is between prophecy that builds up or strengthens (οἰκοδομεῖ) the entire church, and speaking in languages that strengthens only the speaker (v. 4). An important question is, to what does 'mysteries' (μυστήρια) refer? Pentecostals answer that it refers to extrabiblical revelations by the Spirit that lies outside the understanding of the speaker and hearer, and that need to be translated for them to understand what God is revealing to his people (Fee 1987:656; Storms 2012:158).¹³

Pentecostals readily admit that Paul is not positive about the use of the gift of languages within the worship service because of its limitation of building up only the person using it, except in cases where it is interpreted. For that

reason the one speaking in tongues should pray for the ability to translate or interpret it for the sake of the congregation or stay quiet (1 Cor 14:13). 1 Corinthians 14:14 is important because Paul is leading the argument into another direction. When you pray in tongues (προσεύχομαι γλώσση; *contra* vv. 2, 4–6, 9, 13 λαλῶν γλώσση), it is your spirit that is praying, presumably overriding your intellect, for you do not understand what you are saying (ἐὰν γὰρ προσεύχομαι γλώσση, τὸ πνεῦμά μου προσεύχεται, ὁ δὲ νοῦς μου ἄκαρπός ἐστιν – 'for if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful'). In this way, praying for interpretation or translation (προσευχέσθω ἵνα διερμηνεύῃ – 'should pray that he may interpret') in verse 13 is linked to praying in tongues (τὸ πνεῦμά μου προσεύχεται) in verse 14. Then Paul becomes positive about speaking in languages when he removes it from the worship service and links it to personal upbuilding, leading to his remark in verse 18, that he speaks in languages more than any of the receivers of his letter (πάντων ὑμῶν μᾶλλον γλώσσαις λαλῶ – 'I speak in tongues more than all of you').

For this reason it is not correct to state that Paul views speaking in (uninterpreted or untranslated) tongues negatively, as an error that he sought to correct and a practice that he objects to in the strongest terms (Edgar 1996:169–174; Thomas 2011:89), without mentioning that in private Paul speaks freely in languages, i.e. praying in his spirit for private self-edification (Horton 2005:186).

Pentecostals assert that 1 Corinthians 12:10's 'various kinds of languages' (γένη γλωσσῶν) refer to human or earthly languages as well as non-human or heavenly languages (Duffield & Van Cleave 1987:337; Storms 2012:180), reflected in Paul's distinction in 13:1 between 'tongues of humans and angels' (ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων ... καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων – 'in the tongues of men ... and of angels'). In this way, Pentecostals make room for the distinction between the languages Acts 2 mentions and the practice of speaking in languages in the Corinthian worship service. Paul's γένη γλωσσῶν is then set against Luke's ἐτέραις γλώσσαις (Ac 2:4), with Luke referring to languages of different nationalities and Paul referring to different categories of tongues-speech. However, this argument is not necessarily strong because in 1 Corinthians 14:10–11 Paul uses γένη again in the context of different languages (although admittedly he uses γένη φωνῶν, 'different sounds'), but then it refers to earthly languages. It can be argued that γένη γλωσσῶν and γένη φωνῶν are grammatically identical and synonymous in meaning (Busenitz 2014:76). The possibility exists that the argument might be unwarranted that Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 12:10 includes human as well as heavenly languages.

A last argument is connected to 1 Corinthians 13:1 where the apostle refers to speaking in the tongues of humans and of angels indicating, according to Pentecostals, that Paul and the Corinthians conversed in the heavenly language(s) of angels (Fee 1987:630), which represents a 'prayer language'.¹⁴

13. Paul uses the same term in 1 Corinthians 2:7; 13:2; 15:51; Romans 11:25; 16:25; Ephesians 3:3–4; 5:32; Colossians 1:26, and in each case the reference is to revelatory content (Busenitz 2014:82).

14. Cf. Menzies' (2016:128) categorical statement that 'the tongues of men and angels' most likely refers to two kinds of spontaneous, Spirit-inspired speech. The first is linked with prophecy and the latter with 'speaking in tongues' or *glossolalia*. It does not seem that the text itself supports such an interpretation.

The counterargument from the continuationist side is that Paul is using hyperbolic and superlative language for something remarkable and rare (Lenski 1963:545), which might seem probable in the light of 1 Corinthians 13's exaltation of love, as the greatest gift. The unique construction of Paul's description should also be noted (ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαλῶ καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων – 'I speak in the tongues of men and of angels'), indicating that the author is intentionally separating the languages of men and of angels, as part of a larger argument where he is contrasting love and the exercise of spiritual gifts. Love receives priority above all else, even the most profitable of spiritual gifts.

In Acts, references to speaking in languages only occur in 2:1–4; 10:44–47 and 19:1–7 while other references to Spirit baptism or filling is devoid of any reference to it (Ac 4:31; 8:15–17; 9:17; 11:15–16). Pentecostals argue (as stated above) that the occurrence of speaking in tongues in Acts 2 serves to indicate that the same evidence occurred in the rest of the New Testament and that the events on the Day of Pentecost form the precedent and archetype for Spirit baptism (Graves 1984:6).

Conclusion

Pentecostals see a continuity between the speaking in languages as a part of the filling or baptism with the Spirit in Acts 2 and the other four incidents in Acts (8, 9, 10, 19) as well as the phenomenon described in 1 Corinthians 12–14, and their own experience. This is in contradistinction to Protestants who regard the gift of tongues as the miraculous ability to speak in real foreign tongues in their quest to reach people from different nationalities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the same time Pentecostals allow for the speaking in tongues in Acts 2 to refer to existing languages, so that those present understood the message, each in his or her own language, while the Corinthian phenomenon refers to speaking in unknown (angelic or heavenly) languages that only God understands, and need to be interpreted or translated for those present in order to be understood. In this article the pentecostal claim of continuity between the speaking in languages in Acts, Corinthians and the contemporary day is analysed and criticised. If a discontinuity between the Acts languages and Corinthian languages can be supposed, as seems to be the case, with modern charismatic experience reserved to the Corinthian phenomenon, it implies that the pentecostal restorationists' argument needs to be reconsidered.

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