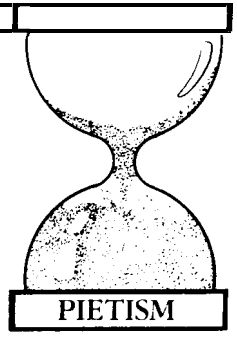


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., 1994

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CHARISMATIC CONFUSION: Part 2: The Nature of Tongues (Continued)

by Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., Th. D.

Last month I began a study of tongues-speaking. As I mentioned then, and as I will demonstrate as the study unfolds, there are eschatological implications to tongues-speaking. Unfortunately, for the dispensationalists, those implications are preteristic, rather than futuristic.

This puts the non-charismatic dispensationalist between a rock and a hard-head. On the one hand, his theology of the last days cannot resist charismatic phenomenon, because of Acts 2:16ff. On the other hand, if he attempts to rebut tongues-speaking, he could end up a preterist, as I will show

In this installment of our series I will finish the study of the nature of tongues. These foundational studies are necessary to respond to charismatic brethren, but are also necessary to lay the ground work for a preterist understanding of tongues.

The Form of Tongues as Languages

In the last newsletter I gave three arguments for tongues being foreign human languages: (1) The first occurrence of tongues is indisputably in a foreign language (Acts 2:6-11). (2) Subsequent episodes in Acts clearly tie tongues to the first occurrence (e.g., Acts 10). (3) All Scriptural references to tongues employ the same words to describe the phenomenon, thereby correlating them.

Let me continue at this juncture with the next two points and then consider a major objection to my position.

Fourth, the *Corinthian* episodes of *glossalalia* are defined in terms fully compatible with Acts. In 1 Corinthians 14:10-11, while in the course of speaking to the Corinthian abuse of tongues, Paul writes: "There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no kind is without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me."

Here note, first, that Paul expressly asserts that *no* language is without meaning. He is comparing tongues to world languages. And he recognizes that all languages have coherent meaning.

But, second, he also observes that in the Corinthian situation the gift of tongues is employed in a way that *no one present could understand the particular foreign language being spoken*. The tongues experience rebuked here is a speaking in a foreign language. This is evident in that he compares the situation to a meeting between two foreigners.

The Greek word "barbarian" indicates one who speaks a language unknown to the Greek-speaking person. Foreigners do not babble incoherently: they speak

structured languages - even though the one to whom they speak might not know and understand the language. This is precisely the failure of the Corinthian Christians they employ their gift of tongues (languages) indiscriminately and thus are not benefiting the congregation.

Fifth, Paul enunciates a biblical principle relating to the exercise of spiritual endowments that negates rhapsodic frenzy. In 1 Corinthians 14:32 Paul writes: "The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets." That is, it is not in keeping with the biblical concept of spiritual gifts for one to lose control of his psycho-somatic self in an emotional frenzy. When the Lord grants spiritual endowments, He gifts the whole man in the integrity of his being. He gifts the rational, as well as the emotional, aspects of man's being. It is only in paganism that those "gifted of the gods" lose control of themselves as their rationality is overridden by a surging of demonic power.

Clearly, the form of tongues in Scripture is that of foreign languages. However, before moving on to other matters, I will survey texts thought to be supportive of the ecstatic-utterance view.

Contrary Evidence Examined

First, 1 Corinthians 14:2 seems to demand non-rational ecstatic utterances: "For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries."

On the surface this appears to treat tongues as an ecstatic utterance rather than a coherent language. How are we to understand Paul here? As a matter of fact, these statements are fully compatible with the foreign language interpretation. This is evident upon the following considerations.

Notice the fallacy involved in employing these texts as evidence of ecstatic rhapsody. Perhaps an illustration of Paul's comments in verse 2 will be helpful.

If I were to stand up in my local congregation and speak Yiddish, no one would understand me. Not one person in my congregation can speak Yiddish, thus no one would comprehend my speech. Yet God knows all languages, so I would be speaking to God. This is the sort of situation Paul is facing at Corinth.

Paul is writing to a particular church about its peculiar situation. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 5:1,2 we read that there is a public case of fornication within the congregation and no one mourns it. We need not conclude that this is a general principle operative in *all churches*. Rather, we must understand that this is the situation *at Corinth*. Likewise, it is in the Corinthian context that tongues are used *when on*

one present understands them. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for such wasteful, vainglorious behavior.

Notice that within the same context (1 Cor. 14:11) Paul refers to a situation in which a *foreign language* is not understood. It is not the case that foreign languages are altogether incomprehensible. Rather, Paul means that they are often not understood in particular *contexts*, as when I might speak Yiddish here in Conestee, South Carolina.

An interesting parallel situation to this is found in Isaiah 33:19. There God promises future deliverance for Israel from subjugation to a foreign nation: 'You will no longer see a fierce people, a people of unintelligible speech which no one comprehends . . .'. Surely this does not mean that the nation dominating Israel speaks ecstatic gibberish so that no one in all the world can understand its language. The statement in Isaiah must mean that the common Israelite present before the conquerors could not understand the conqueror's language. (There is a covenantal significance to this that I will explain in a future issue.)

Consequently, 1 Corinthians 14:2 is best understood as teaching that those at Corinth who spoke in tongues were not speaking to any man present. The reason? Because *no one present* knew the language spoken.

Second, 1 Corinthians 14:14, seems to demand an ecstatic utterance: "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful." Again a surface reading might seem persuasive. But appearances are deceiving. This passage can also be explained adequately in terms of the foreign language interpretation.

Given all the previous support of the foreign language view of tongues, we may interpretively paraphrase this verse as follows: "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit-gift prays, but my understanding of the truths being spoken bears no fruit in others untrained in the language spoken." In fact, The Beck Translation of the Bible reads: "If I pray in a strange language, my spirit prays, but my mind isn't helping anyone." The Amplified Bible reads: "For if I pray in an (unknown) tongue, my spirit (by the Holy Spirit within me) prays, but my mind is unproductive - bears no fruit and helps nobody."

We must understand Paul's reference to "my spirit" as a reference to his 'spirit-gift,' which was being exercised. When he says "my mind is unfruitful" he is not saying his rationality was in abeyance, his understanding lay dormant, as his emotions swelled within. Rather, he means that the understanding he possesses of divine truths by means of this spiritual endowment produces no fruit in those who hear, for they cannot understand his language.

We must remember that the context of the passage urges that the gifts be used for the benefit of others (cf. w. 3-6, 12, 19). If tongues, however, are used improperly in situations in which no one knows what is being spoken, then those tongues do not edify others in the church.

Furthermore, we should note that biblical speakers use the word "fruitless" elsewhere in the sense of non-production of benefit for others:

"And let our people also learn to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they may not be *unfruitful*" (Tit. 3:14). Good works meeting "urgent needs" are obviously external matters.

"For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor *unfruitful* in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 1 :8). One of the elements of fruitfulness is mentioned in the context of 2 Peter 1: "brotherly-love" (v. 7). How could that not be external?

"Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes *unfruitful*" (Matt. 13:22). In Matthew 13 Jesus is comparing wheat and tares, true conversions and false conversions. These are external fruits.

1 Corinthians 14:16 and 17 confirm this interpretation: the people who hear tongues in such contexts cannot declare "amen." That is, they receive no beneficial impartation of knowledge. How could they say "amen" to something they did not understand? Obviously, Paul wants tongues to promote understanding, so that men may praise God with a hearty "Amen! So be it!"

An Advertisement

I will be conducting a mini-conference entitled "Understanding Biblical Prophecy" in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Sunday, June 12th. I will be speaking at East Ridge Presbyterian Church (call 615-867-7295) giving the following studies: "Understanding the Christian Hope" (9:30 AM). "Understanding the Great Tribulation" (10:45 AM). "Understanding the Book of Revelation" (6:00 PM).

I will also be giving a sixteen hour course on Eschatology in Lakeland, Florida, July 11-13. For more information and registration, call: Ken Talbot at 813-644-1451.

I will be speaking at a major Reconstructionist conference, along with Greg Bahnsen, Gary DeMar, Joe Morecraft, R. J. Rushdoony, and others in Atlanta, Georgia, on September 30th and October 1st. For more information call Chalcedon Presbyterian Church: (404) 396-0965.

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