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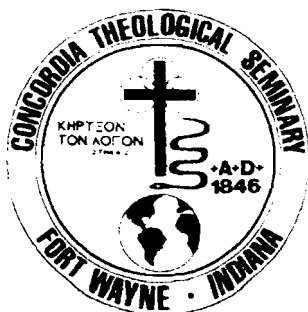
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A Linguistic Analysis of Glossolalia:

A Review Article

Theodore Mueller

TONGUES OF MEN AND ANGELS. The Religious Language of Pentecostalism. By William J. Samarin. The Macmillan Company, New York, 1972. 277 pages. \$7.95.

The author, an eminent linguist, professor of anthropology and linguistics at the University of Toronto, attempts to answer the question: Why do so many educated and well-established members of society “speak in tongues”? He first examines glossolalia from a linguist’s point of view and shows “what Christians, at least, do when they talk in tongues” (p. 2).

His examination is based on a large sample of glossolalia recorded in private and public meetings over a five-year period in Europe and North America. In-depth interviews and questionnaires provided further information about the people and their beliefs. The book is a sympathetic analysis, showing respect for the beliefs of these people as “sacred ground” (p. 236). Samarin dismisses such frequently mentioned psychological causes as repression and emotional release. In some sense glossolalia is “learned behavior” (p. 73), yet not learned as foreign languages are learned. “The tongue speaker is the product of considerable instruction, whether or not glossolalia comes suddenly or gradually” (p. 72). Thus, tongue-speaking is not a “supernaturally acquired skill.”

Samarin analyzes the speech of tongue-speakers in the same manner that a linguist analyzes a foreign language. He makes a phonetic and semantic inventory, and describes its prosodic and paralinguistic features. The discourse “is divided into units of speech . . . through accent, rhythm, intonation and pauses” (p. 78). “The breathgroup itself can often be divided into subgroups through phonological features” (p. 79). It consists of syllables made up of consonants and vowels taken from the speaker’s native language or a foreign language known to him, with much repetition, alliteration, and rhyme. However, the “syllable string does not fall into words” (p. 81), even though one gets the feeling that “words are almost emerging” (p. 82).

In comparing glossolalia to real language Samarin shows how the two differ in form and function. In form, real language is a

systematic relationship between the segments of speech and concepts, a relationship which is missing in glossolalia. While language has communication as its function, there is no meaning to individual strings of syllables in glossolalia. The resemblance to real language is superficial: "It is verbal behavior that consists of using a certain number of consonants and vowels . . . in a limited number of syllables that in turn are organized into larger units that are taken apart and rearranged pseudogrammatically . . . with variations in pitch, volume, speed and intensity" (p. 120). It is "only a facade of language, although at times a very good one indeed" (p. 128). Yet it is not "a specimen of human language because it is neither internally organized nor systematically related to the world man perceives" (p. 128). Yet glossolalia has meaning to the speaker; the meaning is in the area of emotions (joy, concern, anxiety). Thus Samarín defines glossolalia as a "meaningless but phonologically structured human utterance, believed by the speaker to be a real language but bearing no systematic resemblance to any natural language, living or dead" (p. 2).

Other pseudo-languages with glossolalic features are common indeed. Some pretend to be communicative and supernatural — spiritism, Haitian Voodoo, Santería cult, spells, incantations, verbal charms which are part of the occult. Others make no such claim — children use it; it is an in-group signal; it may have a ludic function (Danny Kaye or Charlie Chaplin imitating a language); a farmer uses it when talking to his cow because she does not understand English; a pious Baptist uses it for swearing; it is found in be-bop jazz, and in lullabies. These instances are adduced to show "the normality of glossolalia" (p. 149).

The use of glossolalia has psychological functions — it signals the transition into a new state, like an initiation rite; it serves as proof validating the individual's baptism of the spirit; it indicates man's "yielding to God" and results in peace in the face of incomprehensible fate; but it also is a mode of self-assertion. The glossolalist derives pleasure from it — he becomes proficient in a new skill admired by many; it gives reign to his fantasy; it is used "to express emotion or feeling" (p. 205) comparable to impressionistic poetry and music. For those who stress feeling in religion it is therapeutic; many state explicitly that they have been helped in resolving emotional problems. It has sociological functions — it identifies membership; it sets the group apart and often leads to division through "a feeling of superiority on the part of the tongue speakers" (p. 214). It contributes to the ethos of

the occasion. Leadership and authority in the group are enhanced by its use. Real language fulfills many of the same functions.

In his conclusion Samarin reiterates that glossolalia is not a supernatural phenomenon, nor is there any mystery in it. He modifies his original question in this way: Why do people *want* to utter something which is language-like but fundamentally not language? Samarin answers this question by stating "that it is part of a movement that offers them the fulfillment of aspirations that their previous religious experience created in them. They want to believe in God passionately, to know the delight of communion with Him and to see Him at work in life. They see evidence of this in members of the charismatic movement. It is intellectually satisfying, and belief is nurtured by intimate personal relations" (p. 236).

Many theological arguments have been adduced for or against glossolalia to prove or disprove a variety of positions without first establishing the facts, that is, a clear definition of the behavior. Samarin has given us a scientific analysis without bias. His findings should be a first step in any discussion of glossolalia. Samarin's study also provides some valuable insights into the theological orientation of tongue-speakers. As a neutral observer and a trained scientist without a theological viewpoint to defend, he gives an account of what they believe and of what is important in their thinking. His observations lend themselves to a comparison with the three *sola's* of the Lutheran faith.

God's presence and his direct communication with man play a predominant role in the glossolalists' theology: "God is existential-ly and palpably immanent. He reveals himself in a way you can feel" (p. 4). "Glossolalia is palpable proof of God's influence on man" (p. 199) and "for his presence" (p. 232). It "is seen as an instrument, a 'means of grace', to bring down God's power" (p. 159). It "is used to pass on a message from God" (p. 159). "A person is inspired by the Holy Spirit and has a prophetic message" (p. 160). "They see themselves performing a special role with special powers for the good of others" (p. 158). According to these observations, the Gospel enunciated by Scripture is not the "means of grace" by which God comes to us, reveals Himself, and bestows His gifts. For the glossolalists there is a continuous revelation through tongue-speaking, and through them as God's prophets, which explains the frequently heard expression, "The Lord has told me . . ." *Sola Scriptura* has no meaning for these people.

To obtain God's favor man must fulfill certain conditions, according to glossolalial theology: "God takes over only when a

person deliberately yields himself to Him . . . You have to bend your intellect and submit your tongue to Christ . . . One must be willing to risk all . . . ” The tongue-speakers “make blessing conditional on submission” (p. 200). Glossolalia proves their commitment. Demands are made on the individual, particularly the “stress on personal devotion” (p. 199). According to their statements, God is favorable to these people *because of* something they have done or an attitude they have attained. There is no mention of Christ, His atonement, His sacrifice as the Lamb of God. Jesus is the Lord to be obeyed. There is no gracious Father whose anger has been allayed by Christ’s suffering and death, who has been reconciled and therefore offers one and all the forgiveness of sins. Personal devotion, submitting to God, “being right” with God, which is work-righteousness, is substituted for *sola gratia* as the cause of all blessings.

The faith of glossolalists is based on their inner emotional voice. Faith, emotions, and feelings merge into one vague concept. *Sola fide* is not the instrument by which God’s grace and forgiveness are appropriated. It is not the assurance and certainty that one is God’s child through Christ. It is not trust.

Samarin stresses the non-aberrant nature of glossolalia, a behavior which provides some innocent pleasure for its users — why not view it as some harmless practice with religious significance for those who enjoy it? But is it so harmless? Most respondents were recent converts to the movement and reported frequent, that is, almost daily use of tongue-speaking. But time lapse seems to lead to less activity and to inactivity. When glossolalists are questioned about such disuse, “the usual explanation is that there is some kind of breakdown in communion with God . . . This can result from sin, ‘spiritual dryness’, . . . or unwillingness to be fully dedicated to God” (p. 195). In other words, inactivity signals separation from God. Where will this lead when the individual is somehow confronted with the reality of his sinfulness — when he is stretched out on a hospital bed, drained of all emotional fervor, anxiously awaiting a doctor’s dreaded verdict? From a comparison with past experience glossolalists may well come to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit has left them, that they have lost God’s favor, since there is no longer any internal proof or assurance of God’s presence. Their little voice has died, and there is silence when they need comfort and assurance most.

Samarin shows that there is no demonstrable personality difference between those who join and those who do not join the

charismatic movement. However, those who embrace glossolalia seem to have certain definite expectations: "They too want to believe in God passionately, to know the delight of communion with Him, and to see Him at work in life" (p. 236). They seek proof and assurance of belonging to God. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that this yearning has not been fulfilled in the churches of which they are members. Consequently here is a message for pastors. Each shepherd should ask himself a few questions about his preaching and teaching: Does he present God's love and mercy in each sermon? Is Christ's reconciliation the focal point of all preaching? Is the grace of God in and through Christ the centerpiece from which every exhortation flows? Does he plead with his parishioners by the mercies of God? Or does he stress the law, how people should live, how they should support the current church project, and bring in the unchurched? Does he present Scripture as the anchor and foundation of our hope and peace? Does he direct his listener's to the sure Word of God, devoid of error, in which they see their God and Savior, who has redeemed, purchased, and won them at such an exorbitant price? Does he constantly show the people the innumerable passages affirming and confirming that we are God's children? Does he glowingly describe the peace which passes understanding obtained by trust in Christ and His promises?

For some, glossolalia is a means of establishing their authority: "The individual can use glossolalia for his own good as a participant in that group. . . This is clear with leadership and authority; both are enhanced and validated by the use of glossolalia in religious meeting" (p. 217). What can be said about those pastors who seek to establish leadership and authority by means of a pseudo-language, alleged to be the language of the Holy Ghost? Is there any greater deceit anywhere? The New International Version aptly translates God's description of such prophets as "those who wag their own tongues and yet declare 'The Lord declares' " (Jer. 23:31). How will such a pastor stand before the judgement throne of his Maker and Redeemer?

Some exegetical inferences can be drawn about the Greek expression *heterais glossais lalein* (Acts 2:4). The question centers around the word *glossa*: Does it mean exclusively a real language, or does it include the pseudo-language described by Samaritan? Semantics, that is, the science of meaning, describes meaning in terms of "semantic features" — the characteristic feature or features which distinguish one word from another word, or one set of words from another set sharing enough meaning to make

them related entities. Thus, for instance, the words "father," "brother," "husband," "mother," "sister," "wife" have in common the notion of family relationship. The set "father," "brother," "husband" is distinguished from "mother," "sister," "wife" by the feature "maleness," which is absent from the second set. Likewise, the words "corpse" and "body" are related in meaning, referring to the physical structure of humans and animals. However, the feature "being dead" distinguishes "corpse" from "body" so that "corpse" can never refer to a living body. This reasoning can be applied to the word *glossa*, which, apart from its physiological referent, means a real language in secular Greek literature. As indicated by Samarin, real language has two semantic features: (1) a patterned systematic relationship between speech and concept, and (2) communication as its function. There are other systems of communication; cries of birds or gestures of human beings communicate quite well. However, the first feature, that of a patterned symbolic system, is not associated with them, and thus they are not real languages. Since both semantic features are absent from glossolalia, it seems self-evident that a pseudo-language is not included within the bounds of meaning of the Greek term *glossa*. This conclusion should be plausible to those who subscribe to the traditional Lutheran doctrine of verbal inspiration, with its insistence that every word of Scripture is inspired and that the words of God are not used carelessly or ambiguously.

In conclusion, a historical note might be added showing that the phenomenon of glossolalia is part of a trend. The charismatic movement, with its stress on feelings, individual commitment, and devotional life and its concept of the outpouring of the Holy Ghost, seems to be a twin to eighteenth-century pietism. For the pietists, too, "The Holy Spirit gave assurance of grace through new and peculiar sensations, impressions and revelations wrought in the heart independently of the Word and alongside faith."¹ Walther, who grew up in the midst of pietists, mentions their teaching that "a person must suddenly experience a heavenly joy and hear an inner voice telling him that he had been received into grace."² And there are other parallels. Pietism was a counter-movement which coincided with Romanticism, a literary movement stressing emotions and feelings. It was a reaction against the Enlightenment, with its cold rationalistic approach to life, and found expression in Goethe's *Werther* and Rousseau's *Emile*. In religion pietism was similarly a reaction against the so-called "dead orthodoxy," a rational and logical exposition of a doctrinal system. In many respects the twentieth century parallels the

eighteenth; the cold logic of the scientific age and the impersonality of the computer age are being challenged by a stress on emotionalism in art, literature, and music or by the hedonism of rock concerts. Thus, in twentieth-century religion, Neo-Pentecostalism seems to fill a similar need and signals a turning away from the vagaries of liberalism, the social gospel, and formal religion, and a turning to a more personal form of worship which is also expressed in folk-masses, spirituals, and Gospel songs. Clearly many of the same features and circumstances relate pietism to the present charismatic movement. And this too shall pass.

FOOTNOTES

1. Th. Engelder, W. Arndt, Th. Graebner, and F. E. Mayer, *Popular Symbolics* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1945), p. 94.
2. C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1928), p. 194.

Theodore Mueller, professor emeritus for languages at the University of Kentucky, is now pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church, Danville, Kentucky.