

WHAT IS THIS?

by Ray C. Stedman

In Acts 2 we left our heroes, the apostles and their friends, waiting in the courts of the temple. If that sounds like an introduction to a television serial it is only because this is the book where the action is -- the book of Acts. As the apostles and their friends waited in the temple courts, three amazing things happened:

1. There was a sound like a great blast of wind which roared through the house where they were sitting, the porch of Solomon.
2. There also appeared tongues of fire dancing upon the head of each of the one hundred and twenty believers, and
3. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, other languages, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

That is the phenomenon of Pentecost, the beginning of the church of Jesus Christ the body of Christ; it was the birthday of the church.

As we pick up the account in Chapter 2, we learn the background of the amazing sermon which the Apostle Peter preached on that occasion, a mighty sermon that brought three thousand people to Christ. We will look at part of that sermon now and the rest next week.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappodocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." {Acts 2:5-13 RSV}

Dr. Luke is very careful to describe to us the onlookers to this amazing miracle of tongues. It was intended for this certain group of people, and they are described in one phrase: "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven." The time was following the Passover season during the fifty days between Passover and Pentecost. There were thousands of Jews present who came from all over the earth to Jerusalem at this holy time. These were pilgrims from all the nations under heaven. They were Jews who had been dispersed from the land of Palestine and had gone out to other nations of earth. Many of them made an annual pilgrimage back to Jerusalem.

Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived at this time, tells us that oftentimes the city of Jerusalem (which normally had a population of 150,000) would be swollen in numbers to well over a million. The city was packed and the suburbs were filled, and out on the hillsides were many camps of pilgrims.

It is to this multitude that this miracle was directed. They were not Gentiles, they were Jews; but they had been brought in from all parts of the earth.

God called them together in a most amazing way -- by the summons of a mighty rushing wind. When they heard this sound the multitude came together. The "sound" that is mentioned here, Verse 6, does not refer to the sound of tongues (that would hardly be loud enough to attract the attention of the whole city and countryside) but it is the mighty rush of wind that brought in the people from all over the city. It is the same word that occurs in Verse 2, "And suddenly a sound came from heaven..." When they heard this they rushed together into the temple courts to see what the sound was. It is almost as if God turned on a great siren, a wailing banshee sound, and thus called them all together.

We are used to sirens today. We do not pay much attention to them. But imagine the effect in Jerusalem when this

mighty air raid alarm was suddenly sounded, and the people did not know what it meant. They came rushing together into the temple. When they arrived, they were additionally bewildered, "because each one heard them speaking in his own language." What they heard when they got there was the strange sound of certain men and women, evidently peasants by their dress, from Galilee, who were speaking in over sixteen different languages. It was quite evident that these people were not educated. It was difficult for any to believe that these peasants could have learned these languages. This was long before the days of the art of linguistics, and it was very difficult to learn a language. There were no tourist guides available by which you could stammer through a language, but you had to go live in a country before you could learn the language. Yet here were untrained men and women speaking these languages.

It did not require anything special in the way of supernatural activity in order to understand the languages. These pilgrims had come in from all parts of the earth, and they heard them speaking in their own native tongues. This is what amazed them. It is important to note that Dr. Luke even names the localities, and, therefore, the different languages that were being spoken. He begins in the east, and lists a group of dialects east of Jerusalem: Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia were all toward the east. Then he moves north, including Judea, the very place where they then were, and Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, which were all Roman provinces of Asia Minor, as we know it today. Then he moves south to Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, in northern Africa. Then west, Rome and Cretans, then again south, Arabians. >From all these parts men said, "we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

Though they were speaking in different languages they were saying the same things. What they were declaring was, literally, the "magnificences of God." They were praising God. They were not preaching the gospel; they were speaking how great God is, and they were telling him how great they thought he was. They were worshipping and praising God in these remarkable languages. That was the phenomenon that arrested the attention of this great multitude as they came pressing into the temple courts.

Notice the reaction Dr. Luke records of this crowd. There are, first, two words he uses for astonishment -- they were amazed and bewildered. Twice he indicates that they were amazed. The word in Greek is a word that means literally, "to push out of their senses." It is exactly what we say when we use the modern phrase, "they blew their minds." That is exactly what he said. It blew their minds as they heard this phenomenon occurring. And linked with that, Luke says, they were bewildered. Now the word is not quite accurately translated here. It is really a word which means they were "hit hard, stunned." They were staggered by this amazing thing. They heard these Galilean peasants speaking these languages and they were staggered by it, especially since they easily recognized the languages they were speaking.

Then we have two more words that indicate puzzlement: They wondered, and they were perplexed. Those are suggestive words. "Wondered" means they sought for a solution. They began to ask themselves, what is behind all this. They began to think through, why does this occur? The second word means literally, "thoughts running through their minds." They were perplexed, they had various thoughts running through their minds.

That in turn gave way to two expressions that are recorded of this crowd which are very interesting to note. They indicate the two divisions that always occur when something is suddenly sprung on people. When the human mind is confronted with the new thing it reacts in one of two ways, as in this case.

First, they said to one another, "What does this mean?" i.e., they began to inquire, What is behind this? What is the purpose of it? Why does this occur? That represents the group of open minds that are always ready to investigate further before coming to a conclusion.

But there was another group who immediately dismissed the phenomenon with the infantile reaction of mockery, ridicule. They looked at the disciples and said, "Yes, they're drunk! That explains it. They've been getting into the new wine." Thus they dismissed it with ridicule.

All this sets the stage for Peter's explanation, and, in the next few verses, we have a wonderful message delivered by the apostle on this occasion.

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:" {Acts 2:14-16 RSV}

Notice how alert Peter was, led by the Holy Spirit. He immediately began to speak. Seminary students are taught that

there are three basic rules for public address: stand up, speak up, then shut up. Peter never got to the "shut up." The crowd broke in upon him before he reached the conclusion and gave the altar call. He never got the chance to finish his message. That is a wonderful thing to have happen. When a crowd responds as positively as this, it is an amazing thing.

It occurred because Peter stated the truth. That is all his message was, simply an explanation of reality. That is what the preaching of the gospel is. It is an explanation of what things are really like. It is to seize the occasion to make clear what lies behind what occurs. That is what Peter does. His message consists of three things: An explanation concerning the event, the phenomenon of tongues; a declaration concerning Jesus of Nazareth; and an application concerning the crowd.

We shall limit ourselves now to the explanation he gives concerning the phenomenon of tongues.

He explains to them, first of all, that it is not what they think. What he said to them when he stood up was not quite what we have in the RSV. Here we read, "For these men are not drunk, as you suppose." Literally and exactly what the Greek said was, "He stood up and said to them, 'Not as you suppose are these men drunk.'" In other words, they are drunk, but not from what you suppose. It is not new wine that makes them drunk; it is what Joel said would happen -- the Spirit of God has come upon them.

It is true that to be controlled by the Holy Spirit does affect one somewhat like alcohol does. Paul implies the same thing in Ephesians, "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Holy Spirit," {Eph 5:18 KJV}.

When this crowd looked at these men and women they noted they were excited and voluble, speaking freely and easily, and acting rather strangely. It was not, therefore, unusual that they should conclude that they were drunk. But Peter says, No, you have the wrong explanation. The reason you're wrong is because it is only nine o'clock in the morning. Everyone knows that hardly anyone drinks before eleven o'clock! So it can't be that they are drunk with new wine; they are drunk with the Spirit. And then he quotes this amazing passage from the prophet Joel:

**'And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
yea, and on my menservants
and my maidservants in those days
I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.
And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth beneath,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
the sun shall be turned into darkness
and the moon into blood,
before the day of the Lord comes,
the great and manifest day.
And it shall be that whoever calls
on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'** {Acts 2:17-21 RSV}

Peter's explanation is very simple. This, he said, is what Joel declared would happen. It is, therefore, neither unexpected nor unexplained. It is what Joel predicted. The key to this passage from Joel is the phrase, all flesh. "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." If you read the prophecy as it occurs in the second chapter of Joel, you will find that, before this passage, the prophet had predicted that the Lord would visit his people. He would come to them and would live in their midst. Then, as the prophet puts it, "afterward" (after this visitation) "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." The contrast is between the visitation of God to Israel, and the pouring out of the Spirit upon all peoples everywhere -- Gentiles as well as Jew. The emphasis of this section is that now the good news about Jesus Christ is to go out to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Up to this point it had been confined to the Jewish nation. Jesus had said more than once, "I have come only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," {Matt 10:6, 15:24}. But he had also said, "Other sheep have I which are not of this fold; these also I must bring that there may be one flock," {cf, John 10:16}. Now Peter announces that the time has come when God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, Jews and Gentiles alike. Not only all people everywhere, but all kinds of people -- young men, young women, male and female. "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions." Note the emphasis upon youth. God is saying that in this age of the Spirit, leadership, effectiveness, and power will not be limited to grey hairs, but also young men and young women shall speak and lead -- shall see visions and prophesy. Even servants, menservants and maidservants, obscure people,

insignificant people, upon them God would pour out his Spirit; and they would prophesy. All classes are affected by this.

What Peter did not say is as important as what he did say. He said this is what Joel predicted, but he did not use the phrase which is usually used in the New Testament concerning an Old Testament prophecy. He did not say, "Thus is fulfilled what was said by the prophet Joel." >From other Scriptures we learn that Joel's prophecy has yet to be fulfilled in a greater way. Once again God will visit his people at the second return of Jesus Christ. Then, after his return, the Spirit will be poured out again. When Peter quotes this passage he changes the word which Joel used, "afterward," to the phrase, "in the last days." Thus Peter is adapting this to the present age of the Spirit which begins, he says, with the pouring out of the Spirit of God.

It is important also to notice that in this quotation of Joel there is no mention at all of tongues. Is that not strange? Peter says, "This is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel," but Joel does not mention tongues. Instead he refers to another gift of the Spirit, the gift of prophecy. Prophecy is the ability, in power, to declare the Word of God, to tell forth the Word of God. It will be manifested by young men and old, even servants and obscure people. They shall be equipped by the Spirit to tell forth the Word of God with power. That will be the mark of the age, he says. The emphasis is not upon tongues at all, not even upon gifts, but upon the Spirit who gives the gifts. The age will begin, Peter says, with the pouring out of the Spirit. It will end, Peter indicates, by the sun being turned into darkness, and the moon into blood.

That last section was not fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. According to the prophecy of Jesus himself, in the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew, this is yet for the future. The day is coming when God will show signs on earth and in the heaven above -- blood and fire and vapor of smoke: "The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day." Thus Peter gives us the beginning and the ending of the present age of the Spirit, the great parentheses which mark the age in which we live. It began on Pentecost; it will end after the great tribulation. But through it all runs unbrokenly one great thread: "And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

It is an age of faith, an age of belief. When men believe what God has said and call upon the name of the Lord, asking Jesus to be Lord of life, then they are filled with the Spirit. There need be no manifestation, no outward signs. It will be just as Jesus himself said.

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" {John 7:37-38 RSV}

John immediately adds,

Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believe in him would receive;" {John 7:39a RSV}

From the day of Pentecost on, the Spirit is given to any who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the reason for the manifestation of tongues on the day of Pentecost.

Now the question comes, what about this modern manifestation? Today many are saying, "We are experiencing a second Pentecost. There is a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is the 'latter rain' that was predicted by Joel to follow the 'early rain' of Pentecost." It is unfortunate that no one seems to have noted that Joel says the latter rain will occur after the second return of Jesus Christ, not before. Well then, what about this modern experience when people gather together and speak in strange words and syllables, uttering strange gibberish that no one can understand. Occasionally some purport to interpret it, and suggest messages of various kinds. How shall we judge all this?

The great question that needs to be answered is: Is the modern phenomenon the same gift as that recorded in the Bible? That must be the test. Strangely, I find very few people who ask that question. Most simply assume that the modern manifestation must be the same. But we are exhorted by the Apostle John to "try the spirits" {1 Jn 4:1 KJV}, to test these things and see. Of course the only way you can know the difference is to understand exactly what are the marks of the biblical gift, and then compare it with what we see today. So let me give you, in summary, the four marks of the biblical gift of tongues.

Whenever the true gift of tongues is manifest it will always be characterized by these four marks. The Holy Spirit always moves in line with the Word of God:

First, as we have clearly seen, the biblical gift of tongues is always known languages, spoken somewhere on earth. They may be unknown to the people hearing them, as in the fourteenth chapter of First Corinthians, but they are spoken somewhere. They are not "unknown tongues"; the word "unknown" does not occur in First Corinthians 14 in the Greek language. They are known languages, spoken somewhere.

Second, they are addressed to God as praise and worship. They are not messages intended for men. Tongues is not a means of preaching the gospel. The early Christians did not preach the gospel in tongues in the New Testament; they praised God in tongues, they worshipped God in these strange languages. Paul confirms this in his treatise on tongues in First Corinthians 14. He says there,

For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; {1 Cor 14:2a RSV}

This exposes the falseness of those occasions during which a message is conveyed in tongues to those who are present, or some prediction is made, or some attempt is made to proclaim a truth for the benefit of the people present. These are false, says the New Testament, for he that speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but in worship and praise to God.

The third mark is very clear in this Pentecost incident. The gift of tongues is intended to be manifested publicly and never privately. Again Paul confirms this in 1 Corinthians 12:7:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. {1 Cor 12:7 RSV}

The gifts are not for private blessing; they are for the common good. In chapter fourteen he insists that if tongues, which is intended for another use, be exercised in the church, then it must be interpreted, otherwise it is of no value whatsoever. It is not designed for individual benefit; it is for the edifying of others. This was perfectly evident on the day of Pentecost. The miracle occurred for the benefit of the thousands of Jews who had gathered in from the four corners of the earth. There is no record in the New Testament of the private use of tongues.

This leads to the last sign which is also clearly evident at Pentecost and is definitely referred to by Paul in First Corinthians 14: The biblical gift of tongues is a sign to unbelievers, and not to believers. It is amazing how many Pentecostal writers will deal with First Corinthians, Chapter 14, and totally ignore Verse 22. They will not face the fact that Paul quotes an Old Testament prophet, the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah had predicted to the people of Israel that there would come a day when God would send to them men speaking strange tongues. And, says Isaiah, when you hear these you will know that the hour has struck when God turns from his limited ministry to Israel and begins to send the message out to all peoples everywhere. That is the reason why the tongues were given. It was a sign to unbelievers that the gospel was now going out to the whole Gentile world. Wherever you find tongues occurring in the New Testament you will always find unbelievers present, because tongues is a sign to them and not to believers.

Now that is the biblical gift of tongues. How do you square that with the present day manifestation? In my judgment of more than thirty years of observation, it is definitely not the same thing. The present day manifestation does not meet the biblical standard at all, in any way. There are occasional attempts to square it with the biblical picture but these are always twisted and obviously strained attempts to make it fit; but it does not fit. Furthermore, we need to recognize that this utterance of gibberish, this torrent of strange syllables, is a very common thing in other religions. It occurs frequently in Hinduism and among several African cults. Even Plato and the early Greeks, long before Christ, discoursed about the phenomenon of speaking in strange syllables under religious ecstasy. But this has nothing to do with the biblical gift of languages; it is something else.

Well then what is it? At best it is a psychological response to a strong desire to have something that will give some sense of spiritual or exceptional superiority in some remarkable way. It is a trick that the mind plays upon us to fulfill an overpowering desire to have something that will mark us as unusually favored in God's sight. That is almost always the explanation behind the hunger of those who seek this gift. It is, however, true that the false gift often appears in connection with a genuine moving of the Holy Spirit, and sometimes it is hard to separate the true from the false. Oftentimes this false gift is a seed planted by the enemy in the midst of a genuine moving of the Spirit. Much of the blessing that comes from the genuine awakening is unthinkingly attributed to tongues, to the manifestation of this so-called gift of tongues.

But again, after the observation of many years, it is clear to me that the results of yielding to this false gift of tongues is frequently spiritual derailment. Many who have begun well, who have begun to walk in the Spirit, and to seek after the Lord, and grow, are derailed, shunted into a dead-end street which never goes anywhere. It ultimately results in

divisiveness, in separation of Christian from Christian, as well as prolonged barrenness in the spiritual life. That is why there is need for warning against this false manifestation that is so abroad today. The true gift of God will always be in line with the biblical picture.

We need to take special heed to Peter's final word in this section that, in this day, this age of the Spirit, all that the Spirit of God makes available to us is given to whomever calls on the name of the Lord. As Paul says in the opening words of his letter to the Ephesians, "you have been blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus," {cf, Eph 1:3}. And Peter adds, "His divine power has granted to us all that pertains to life and godliness," {2 Pet 1:3 RSV}. We need nothing further, no new provision or supply, but only to claim by faith what is already ours in Christ Jesus.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this amazing phenomenon of the Spirit and for the fact that we still live in the age of the Spirit when all that you are doing today is done by the might and power of the Holy Spirit. Grant that we may understand this and live in accordance with it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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