
Chapter 12.7
Tongues & the Religious Context
of 1 Corinthians 14

Obscure Utterances in the Pagan Mystery Religions

Table of Topics

- A) Tongue Utterances in Ancient Religions, Corinth, and World-wide Today**
- B) The Apostle's Concern of Pagan & Even Demonic Influences in the Corinthian Church**
- C) The Apostle's Desire to Abolish Pagan Tongue Utterances & Preserve the Gift of Tongues**

Extras & Endnotes

Primary Points

- One of the things that has fueled the debate over tongues is that 1 Corinthians 14 is among the most difficult passages in the entire NT to understand.
- Unfortunately, it would seem the best Bible scholars have neglected the contexts and Greek text of the passage.
- Interpreting biblical passages in isolation without considering what the rest of the Bible says is what cults do, not sincere Christians.
- Two different “tongues” phenomena are being described in Acts and 1 Corinthians 14. One a miraculous sign to unbelievers of real human language, and the other an incoherent, self-edifying, private “prayer” language. Either the Apostle is introducing an additional gift of tongues not described in Acts or he is exposing a counterfeit version.
- Even within 1 Cor 14 itself there are two kinds of tongues being described.
- One of the things that *glossaist* must prove is that Luke and Paul had completely different understandings of what the gift of tongues really was.
- While there are many attributes of the gift of tongues that Luke and the Apostle agree on, *none of them are reflected in the modern version of tongues.*
- Not only did Paul write 1 Cor with the historical understanding of the events in Acts in mind, but *Luke wrote Acts with the problems in Corinth in mind.*
- The Corinthian church was filled with the most worldly, immoral, immature, selfish, independent people we encounter in the NT.
- The Apostle repeatedly denounced the warned the Corinthians because they were so *self-centered* and *egocentric*. Now, convince yourself that when the Apostle says four sentences later, “**He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself**” (14:4) that he means this is a *good* thing, something he really wants the puffed up, conceited, self-centered, and ego-centric Corinthians to hotly pursue, as so many interpret this passage today.

A) Tongue Utterances in Ancient Religions, Corinth, and World-wide Today

It is vitally important to understand the popular religious practices occurring in Corinth at the time the Apostle wrote his letter. More specifically, what the Apostle describes in 1 Corinthians 14 as a spontaneous, obscure, meaningless utterance was commonly observed in the temple worship of the Greek mystery religions operating in abundance at the time. This is a critical key to determining what the Apostle is referring to when he describes a phenomenon in the Corinthian church that merely mimics the gift of tongues described in Acts and confirmed by the Apostle himself as a miraculous **"sign . . . to unbelievers"** (14:22). This is perhaps the most important context that expositors have ignored, and therefore misinterpreted this passage.

As noted in the previous chapter, it is clear that the Apostle is describing two different phenomena in Acts and 1 Corinthians 14 and that there are two primary understandings of what the non-miraculous phenomenon is: 1) An additional and legitimate version of the biblical gift of tongues, but which differs completely from that described in Acts, or 2) a pagan counterfeit of tongues widely practiced in mystery temples in Corinth in the first century and throughout the world today. The fact that a spontaneous, obscure, and meaningless "tongue" utterance was a popular sign of spirituality in the Greek mystery religions from which many of the Corinthian Christians had no doubt come out of, is a decisive factor in favor of option 2.

Concerning these Greek mystery religions we read in the secular reference *The Encyclopedia Britannica*:

Mystery religions were secret cults of the Greek-Roman world that offered to individuals a way to feel religious experiences not provided by the official public religion. . . . The mystery religions reached their peak of popularity in the first three centuries A.D. At that time an individual could choose among many religions of this type. . . . Christianity [and the Corinthian Church] originated during the time . . . at which the mysteries reached their height of popularity.¹

We have a great deal of evidence that the Greek mystery religions were particularly popular in Corinth. Accordingly, the Pentecostal NT scholar Gordon Fee writes:

The religious expression of Corinth was as diverse as its population. Pausanias [2nd c. Greek historian] describes at least 26 sacred places . . . devoted to the "many gods" (the

Roman-Greek pantheon) and “many lords” (the mystery cults) mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor. 8:5.²

The popular Bible teacher John MacArthur agrees and makes some of the same conclusions we will below:

In Corinth paganism was spelled with a capital P. . . . One of the greatest threats of all was the continuing influence from pagan mystery religions that they had formerly practiced. For over a thousand years these religions had dominated that part of the world. . . . Several pagan practices were especially influential in the church at Corinth. . . . New Testament Corinth was filled with priests, priestesses, religious prostitutes, soothsayers, and diviners of the mystery religions who claimed to represent a god or gods and to have supernatural powers that proved their claims. Unbelievably, some of their dramatic and bizarre practices were mimicked in the church.³

The reason that the presence of Greek mystery temples in Corinth is important to our interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12-14 is because an obscure, spontaneous, meaningless “tongue” utterance was considered a mark of divine inspiration and spirituality in these pagan places of worship.

Accordingly, Raymond F. Collins, in his well regarded commentary on 1 Corinthians remarks:

The Corinthians’ Greco-Roman culture widely assumed that religious experience was involuntary and irrational. Ecstatic experience was a matter beyond human control; it was a matter of being driven by a divine force.⁴

Along these lines, many scholars have found evidence of modern *glossaism* in ancient pagan worship. Christopher Forbes quotes descriptions of such worship before and around the first century including:

In such [incoherent] words the Cumaean Sibyl [priestess] chants from the shrine her dread enigmas . . . wrapping truth in darkness. . . . [Then] the frenzy ceased and the raving lips were hushed. . . . In the account of Appius Claudius’ visit to Delphi [a shrine of the ancient Greek mystery religions] [we read of the prophetess] . . . wild frenzy overflowed through her foaming lips; she groaned and uttered loud inarticulate cries with panting breath.⁵

Such a practice persisted into the second century, as the early Church critic Celsus described pagan mystery religion worship when he wrote (c. 170):

There are many who, although of no name, with the greatest facility and on the slightest occasion, whether within or without temples, assume the motions and gestures of inspired persons . . . [who speak] strange, fanatical, and quite unintelligible words, of which no rational person can find the meaning: for so dark are they, as to have no meaning at all.⁶

Accordingly, Grant R. Osborne, Professor of NT at Trinity confirms the consensus of modern scholarship that:

In the ancient world, pagan prophets were commonly associated with ecstatic utterances, trances, and frenzied behavior. . . . In the hellenistic [ancient Greek] world the prophetess of Delphi and the Sibylline priestess spoke in an unknown or unintelligible speech. Moreover, the Dionysian rites contained a trancelike state as well as glossolalia [incoherent speech⁷].⁸

Along the same lines, NT scholar J. D. G. Dunn relates:

What Celsus (and Lucian) understood as the nonsense [speech] born of madness was accepted at the level of *Volksreligion* [popular religion] as the sure sign that a prophet was genuinely inspired by the god for whom he spoke. By lifting the prophet to this high level of ecstasy, the deity thereby authenticated the message delivered previously in understandable language. Put simply, among the common people [obscure, meaningless] "tongues" was recognized as the divine legitimation of prophecy in the Hellenistic age.⁹

Accordingly, we read in the *New Bible Dictionary*:

Gentile converts [in Corinth] may have come directly from paganism. . . . Ecstasy, including speaking in glossolalia, was a common phenomenon in Graeco-Oriental religions, and this may help account for the Corinthians' misuse of Christian spiritual gifts.¹⁰

Likewise, regarding the context of 1 Corinthians 12-14, the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* states, "Paul is obviously aware of the existence of mystic and ecstatic manifestations in Hellenism."¹¹

These more recent references support those made by earlier commentators such as Robert Gromacki, who in his landmark study entitled *The Modern Tongues Movement*, adds:

[A] carnal concept [of spirituality in the Corinthian church] was no doubt a remnant of their unsaved idolatrous days when ecstatic [incoherent] utterances made by a pagan priest or priestess under the control of a false god were considered to be the pinnacle of a religious experience.¹²

Finally, Joseph Dillow, in his book, *Speaking in Tongues*, summarized the religious context of Corinth and its implications on the issue at hand:

Corinth was an extremely immoral city, full of pagan superstition and idol worship. In the heathen worship there of the goddess of Diana the use of gibberish, or unintelligible language, was common. . . . [Tongue utterances] had an important place in this pagan worship. The words were believed to be revealed by a god or spirit to the priest or devotee. . . . Through this the worshiper believed that he was having a privileged, intimate contact with his god not possible when he spoke to it in his native language. . . .

Kittel [in the highly regarded *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*] mentions the "muttering of words or sounds without interconnection of meaning" as part of the idol worship at Corinth, and notes that it occurred commonly in the cults of various other Greek gods and goddesses as well. . . .¹³

Pagan tribes all over the world have been speaking in [tongue utterances] for centuries. The similarities between their practice and that of the tongues movement is striking. At its root the movement is simply a merger of Christianity with paganism . . . the practice of the Corinthians paralleled their involvement in the Greek mystery religions prior to becoming Christians. The same battle that Paul fought in Corinth is being raised again.¹⁴

Dillow's point that "tongue" utterances as found in *glossaism* are found in pagan religions all over the world is an important point regarding the true nature of the modern phenomenon. Along these lines we quoted some of the following in a previous chapter from the *Encyclopedia of Religion* under the entry "Glossolalia," which is the technical term for tongues speaking in general:

Glossolalia (from the Greek *glosse*, "tongue, language," and *lalein*, "to talk") is a nonordinary speech behavior that is institutionalized as a religious ritual in numerous Western and non-Western religious communities. Its worldwide distribution attests to its antiquity, as does its mention in ancient documents. . . . There are references to it in the [Hindu] Vedas (c. 1000 BC), in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, and in Tibetan

Tantric writings. Traces of it can be found in the litanies (*dhikrs*) of some orders of the Islamic Sufi mystics. . . .

[Tongues speaking] occurred in some of the ancient Greek religions and in various primitive religions. . . . Paul urged restraint in the practice . . . since such a spectacular spiritual gift could be abused. Edification, as opposed to personal satisfaction, was set as the test of acceptable glossolalia. If the meaning could not be disclosed, Paul regarded it with suspicion. . . .

In the circumpolar region, many shamans [witch doctors], among the Intuit [Eskimo] . . . use their religious ritual's secret languages that consist of a mixture of nonsense syllables. . . . [T]hese secret trance dialects are taught by the master shamans to their neophytes. . . . From Africa we have reports of a secret religious trance language used exclusively by women. . . .

When speaking in tongues . . . if the pronouncement is in nonsense syllables, as, for instance, among Christians speaking in tongues or among the nomadic, reindeer-hunting Chukchi of Siberia, an "interpretation" may be provided. . . .

The case of Anneliese Michel brings up the question of what kinds of religious experience are commonly expressed by glossolalia. In her case, the experience was that of [demonic] possession, and glossolalia was the voice, the "language," of the demons that she reported were possessing her.

Possession is one of the most frequent ritual occasions for the use of glossolalia. In possession, an entity from the sacred dimension of reality is experienced as penetrating the respective person . . . for instance, those of the dead of the Trobriand Islanders, ancestral spirits in Africa, and various spirits in Haitian Voodoo—have pronounced personality traits that are expressed in glossolalia. . . .

Communication by glossolalia is instituted not only with unfriendly beings, of course. On a tape recording made in Borneo a female healer can be heard calling her helping spirit [and this is a *friendly* being?]. In the *zar* cult of Ethiopia, the shamans [essentially witch doctors] talk to the *zars* [spirits] in a "secret language." The shamans of the Semai of Malaysia use glossolalia to invite the "nephews of the gods" to a feast, and the Yanomamo Indians of Amazonia chant while in a trance to their *hekura* demons, calling them to come live in their chests" ¹⁵

Obviously, then, it is imperative that careful discernment is exercised in evaluating modern *glossaism*, as their version of the

gift is indistinguishable from the ancient and world-wide pagan variety.¹⁶

B) The Apostle's Concern of Pagan & Even Demonic Influences in the Corinthian Church

When the Apostle writes to this church, in this city, his obvious concern regarding pagan, and even demonic influence in the Corinthian church, is to be expected and it is obvious. In fact, we know for certain that some of those in the church were indeed involved in demonic worship practices.

Accordingly, the Apostle tells them:

[M]y dear friends, flee from idolatry. . . . Do not those [of you] who eat the [pagan religious] sacrifices participate in the [pagan religious] altar? Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. (1 Cor 10:14-16, 18-22).

Either ignorance or a refusal to recognize the non-Christian elements in pagan worship led the Corinthians to "**be participants with demons.**" However, it would seem they were not only practicing such things *outside* of the church, but perhaps in the Christian assembly as well. Nonetheless, it would seem that spontaneous, obscure utterances, like those practiced in the pagan mystery temples is a concern of both the Corinthians and the Apostle. This is precisely what prompts the Apostle's introduction to 1 Corinthians 12-14:

Now concerning [pneumatikon: "spiritual manifestations"¹⁷], brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. You know that when you were pagans, you were [apagomenoi: "carried away"] to the dumb [and demonic] idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed";¹⁸ and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit (12:1-3).

Let us remember at this point that evidently the Corinthians had written the Apostle a letter with questions that he is responding to. Therefore, his statement in 7:1, "**Now concerning the matters**

you wrote about . . ." sets the background for possibly the entire letter, but certainly for chapters 12-14. Undoubtedly, then, the Corinthians had written concerning the presence of obscure, spontaneous utterances occurring in their assembly, and wondered if it was a "spiritual" (i.e. *pneumatikos*) thing, and particularly of the *Holy Spirit*.

Along these lines, D. A. Carson points out that there is evidence to suggest that there were those in Corinth who wanted to ban the practice of speaking in tongues altogether because of its apparent connection to pagan worship in their city:

At the end of the discussion [in 1 Cor. 12-14], Paul can write, "Do not forbid speaking in tongues" (14:39)—which surely suggests that is what some would have preferred. . . . Their skepticism, it may be, arose from their own pagan backgrounds (. . . the majority of Corinthian believers emerged from paganism . . .), just as the pagan backgrounds of certain people made them uneasy about eating food that had been offered to idols (1 Cor. 8). . . . F. W. Grosheide in his *Commentary of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* suggests that some Corinthian believers were worried that some of the utterances spoken in obscure tongues might actually be blasphemous statements, possibly unrecognized even by the speakers.¹⁹

Therefore, one of the more important interpretive keys to understanding 1 Corinthians 12-14 is the fact that *the Apostle was concerned that the pagan variety of tongues was operating in the church, and he wanted to abolish it, while preserving the real gift if it were present*. Therefore, the Apostle's purpose in chapters 12-14 is to help the Corinthians determine whether something occurring among them is of the Holy Spirit or not.

He begins by reminding them that many of the Corinthians had experienced an abandonment of self-control in the worship practices of the pagan mystery religions in which they had been "**carried away** [*apagomenoi*]" (12:2) in emotional and even demonic worship. *Apagomenoi* is a strong word, often implying a rather forceful leading.²⁰ Accordingly, the influential early Church leader Chrysostom (c. 349-407) taught concerning this passage:

Now what he means is this: "In the idol-temples," saith he, "if any were at any time possessed by an unclean [demonic] spirit and began to divine [speak], even as one dragged away, so was he drawn by that [demonic] spirit in chains; knowing nothing of the things which he utters. For this is peculiar to the [pagan] soothsayer, to be beside himself, to be under

compulsion, to be pushed, to be dragged, to be hailed as a madman.²¹

This same perspective is reflected in modern scholarship as well. The respected NT scholar C. K. Barrett says the Apostle's wording in 1 Corinthians 12:1-3:

suggests moments of ecstasy experienced in heathen religion, when a human being is (or is believed to be) possessed by a supernatural. . . . Paul himself in this verse appears to think of demons as ravishing those who take part in heathen worship . . . neither Paul nor his readers doubted that there were other spirits capable of inspiring ecstatic speech.²²

Dr. David Aune, a recognized expert on first century pagan and Christian worship likewise writes:

A careful examination of the context shows that when Paul referred to the pagan background of the Corinthian Christians in I Cor. 12:2, he was in all probability referring to pagan religious experiences of possession trance.²³

In agreement, Frederick Dale Bruner describes the mindless, ecstatic worship that the Apostle feared was occurring in Corinth:

The very characteristic of the Corinthians' heathen past, [Paul] argues, was the sense of being overpowered and carried away by spiritual forces. . . . "There is no doubt at all," Schrenk comments, "that Paul intends to say here, The truly spiritual is not marked by a being swept away . . . that was precisely the characteristic of your previous fanatical religion."

It is important to notice that Paul places this valuation of the spiritually "sweeping" at the very outset of his treatment of "spiritual things" in Corinth. As the superscription to his essay in chapters twelve to fourteen Paul has written: Seizure is not necessarily Christian or paramountly spiritual.²⁴

On the contrary, seizure in such settings is often demonically empowered, and it is because some in the Corinthian assembly were acting and worshipping as they did in the pagan temples they had come from, that Paul reminds them of their previous and current demonic worship practices.²⁵ Accordingly, the Pentecostal expositor Dr. Fee agrees and writes concerning 1 Corinthians 12:1-3:

It seems probable that what is in view is their former experience of "ecstasy" or "inspired utterances" as pagans. . . . He has also argued earlier that the mute idols represent

demons (10:20-21)—who can and do speak through their devotees. Most likely, therefore, he is reminding them of what they well know, that in some of the cults, “inspired utterances” were part of the worship. . . .

If so, then [Paul’s] concern is to establish early on, as v. 3 seems to corroborate, that it is not “inspired speech” as such that is evidence of the Spirit. They had already known that phenomenon as pagans. Rather, what counts is the *intelligible and Christian content* of such utterances.²⁶

Along the same lines, NT scholar H. Wayne House relates:

With the ecstasism of Dionysianism [a popular Greek mystery religion] and the emphasis on tongues-speaking and oracles in the religion of Apollo, it is not surprising that some of the Corinthians carried these pagan ideas in the church at Corinth, especially the practice of glossolalia for which both of these religions are known (though the Dionysian cult did not include interpretation of the glossolalia as did that of Apollo). . . .

In their pagan past the spirit would enable them to come into contact with the supernatural and to experience an oneness with the god in the state of ecstasy. These same attitudes existed among believers at Corinth. They had difficulty in accepting the fact that an idol (behind whom was a demon) was nothing and that meat sacrificed to an idol was just meat (1 Cor 8:1-7). . . .

Also 1 Corinthians 12:1-3 demonstrates that they were not distinguishing the difference between speaking by the Spirit of God and speaking by means of the [demon] in their previous pagan worship, by whom they were led to false worship.²⁷

Along the same lines, even the ardent *glossaist* leader Michael Green is willing to admit:

Paul is clear that some of his Corinthian friends speak in tongues that are not at all given by the Holy Spirit but are a relic of the demonic influences upon them in their pagan days. . . . He also realized, as many Pentecostals do [do they?], that there is a demonic counterfeit to tongues speaking. In the Corinthian assembly men were saying 'a curse on Jesus' and were using the tongues of their old pagan days which they had learned in idol worship. Tongues, in fact, is a phenomenon which is widely disseminated and is observable in many cultures, ancient and modern. It is no exclusive mark of the possession of the Holy Spirit.²⁸

In light of the evidence then, the view of the *glossaist* theologian Wayne Grudem, regarding the Apostle's concern of pagan and even demonic worship practices occurring in the Corinthian congregation, seems misguided when he writes:

First, it must be said that this is not Paul's concern, even in the city of Corinth where many had come from pagan temple worship and where Paul had clearly said that "what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God" He gives no warning that they should beware of demonic counterfeit or even think that this would be a possibility when they use this gift. . . . This fear, then, is not one that Paul seemed troubled by.²⁹

On the contrary, neither the Apostle, nor we should assume, like Dr. Grudem would have us do, that just because something happens in a Christian church that it cannot be demonically controlled and inspired. Especially when the practice is identical to that practiced in demonic environments then and now.³⁰ We will say it again, not everything spiritual is holy.

In view of what we've learned about the religious context of 1 Corinthians 12:1-3, a paraphrase of it may be helpful at this point. Essentially, the Apostle introduces this section by saying:

Some have written me a question concerning some of the spiritual manifestations (pneumatikon) that are occurring in your public worship. Evidently, some of the things that you used to practice in the temples of the pagan mystery religions are occurring in your own worship services, like making utterances in a language no one can understand.

For those of you who automatically think they are from God, I don't want you to be so naïve, because, if you will remember, some of the things that looked spiritual when you worshipped in the pagan temples were actually demonic. So an incoherent utterance cannot automatically be accepted as coming from the Holy Spirit.

The only way you can really tell is by the content of the utterance because you can be sure that if they are saying "Jesus be cursed" it is not coming from the Holy Spirit. But if they are saying "Jesus is Lord" then you know the utterance is coming from the Holy Spirit. And let me tell you some other things that will help you discern if something that looks spiritual is pagan/demonic or Christian. . . .

As we will discuss further below, the Apostle goes on to give instructions regarding real manifestations of the Holy Spirit so that the Corinthians can discern such things.

Additional evidence that the Apostle is concerned with pagan and even demonic influences in the worship of the Corinthians is his mention of **“a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal”** (13:1). This is most likely an allusion to musical instruments that were well recognized as being used in the temples of the Greek mystery religions. Accordingly, Dr. Fee acknowledges the connection and explains a **“clanging cymbal”** refers to:

an instrument expressly associated with the pagan cults. . . . In particular with the cult of Cybele, where some of the more bizarre forms of “ecstasy” also occurred. . . . Perhaps, then, this is an illusion to 12:2 and their former associations with such cults. To speak in tongues as they were doing . . . makes one sound like the empty, hollow noises of pagan worship.³¹

Likewise, Dr. House writes regarding the mention of these particular musical instruments in the context of correcting Corinthian worship:

This may be an allusion to the use of these instruments in the mystery cults. These instruments were used to produce the ecstatic condition that provided the emotional intoxication needed to experience the sacramental celebration.³²

This is why the Apostle specifically contrasted **“love,”** which is the emblem and proof of the Christian religion, with *emotionalism*,³³ which is an obvious symbol of pagan religion.

Secondly, when the Apostle remarks to the Corinthians that, **“anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men . . . he utters mysteries [mysteria] with his spirit** [not the Holy Spirit³⁴]” (14:2), it would certainly seem to be a reference to pagan mystery religion. This is, in fact, how these religious cults derived their name. Along these lines, Dr. House **explains:**

The term *mystery* is used in the New Testament but with a different force. . . . In the New Testament it refers to the things of God that could not be known by man except through revelation from God. The revelation given of these things by the Holy Spirit is not obscure but clear and is given to be communication to God’s people (1 Cor 2:1–16). It is not given privately in unknown words.

In heathen religions this word referred to the hidden secrets of the gods which only the initiated could know. Those initiated into such mysteries claimed to have contact with the

spirit world through emotional excitement, revelations, the working of miracles and the speaking of unknown words revealed by the spirits. In the New Testament Church every Christian is initiated.³⁵

This sounds eerily similar to the environment promoted in modern *glossaism* whose participants claim a unique contact with God through the mysterious, although incoherent utterances of their "prayer language." It was such a practice that those in the mystery religions separated themselves from others as having a superior experience with their gods.

Likewise, The NT scholar Glenn W. Barker, Professor of Christian Origins at Fuller, says the following regarding the Apostle's sometimes "customized" use of the word "mystery."

It is well known that Paul selected certain words out of the general flow of language, knowing something of their backgrounds, and used them for his own purposes. . . . Within the context of religious terminology . . . *mysteria* . . . is applied mostly to the mysteries, a religious phenomenon of ancient Greece. . . . The Hellenistic mysteries and the Christian mystery differ significantly. The content of the Hellenistic mystery had to be carefully hidden lest it fall into unworthy hands. In the Christian mystery the revelation is freely proclaimed to the whole world.³⁶

Accordingly, we see several important differences between a "mystery" in paganism and in Christianity. In the latter, a mystery is to be revealed and preached for the benefit of all the people. In this very letter, for example, the Apostle tells the Corinthians, "**I tell you a mystery**" (15:51; cf. Rom 11:25; 16:25; Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 6, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; 1 Tim 3:16; Rev 1:20). On the other hand, in pagan religions a "mystery" was to be rather secret and withheld from the masses. This difference between a pagan and Christian "mystery" in regards to the gift of tongues is illustrated in what would seem to be the earliest mention of the gift of tongues outside of the NT in early Christian literature. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, writes (c. 180):

We do also hear many brethren in the church, who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God.³⁷

The early Church understood what modern *glossaists* do not. Declaring "the mysteries of God" and making them understandable to others is a hallmark of the Christian religion. Uttering a

"mystery" in incoherent gibberish that no one can understand and for merely private "edification" is a hallmark of pagan religion and has no place amongst Christians.

Therefore, when the Apostle remarks to the Corinthians that, **"anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men . . . he utters mysteries with his spirit"** (14:2) we should take notice. And one of the things we should notice is that the Apostle says the person merely does it with **"his [human] spirit"** not the Holy Spirit.³⁸ And we know that he is not talking about the gift of tongues described throughout the book of Acts and 1 Corinthians 14:22 as a miraculous sign to unbelievers.

In addition, the Apostle's description of this other "tongue" phenomenon as an obscure utterance of **"mysteries"** is definitely not a Christian thing, which becomes clear if one will study how this word is used in the Scripture references above. Rather, the Apostle's statement would seem to be a reference to one of the primary practices occurring in the Greek mystery temples scattered throughout the city of Corinth.³⁹

Along the same lines, in chapter 14, the Apostle's description of how a Corinthian unbeliever would react to seeing all the Corinthian believers speaking in a tongue is significant.⁴⁰ The Apostle says the Corinthian visitors will **"say that you are mad [mainesthe]"** (14:23 NASB). The Greek word here means more than just "crazy" as we might interpret it. In the context of religious worship at the time, it was used in Greek literature as a technical term referring to the ecstatic state of worshipers in the Greek mystery religions. Accordingly, the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* notes:

mainesthai is the technical term of the cult of Dionysus and of the inspired "mantic" divination, the best known of which were the Sibyls [prophets] in the grip of divine power. . . . The use of *mainesthai* [in 1 Cor 14] reminds us of the madness in [Greek mystery religions] in which a man is carried away in *mania* . . . into an ecstasy caused by the deity.⁴¹

As the Pentecostal Dr. Fee puts it, "The response of the unbeliever to the community's collective speaking in tongues is to equate the Christian gathering with the mania that attended some of the mystery cults."⁴² Likewise, Luke Timothy Johnson, a recognized expert on early Christian and pagan worship practices, comments on this verse, "In context, this can only mean 'you are prophesying the way all other cults do, in a frenzy.'"⁴³ Elsewhere he writes:

Paul's concerns are explicit. The first is his worry that the form of *glossolalia* might be mistaken for the mantic prophecy

prevalent in Greco-Roman culture. His caution in I Cor 12:1 that *ta pneumatika* drew them away to idolatry when they were pagans, and his conclusion in 14:23 that outsiders would assume that an assembly of glossalists "are raving as mantic prophets rave" both point in this direction. . . . His concern here is a variation of the command in I John 4:1 to "test the spirits to see if they are from God." ⁴⁴

Likewise, in spite of numerous objections from *glossaists*, Max Turner, Director of Research at London Bible College, and a supporter of *glossaism*, notes that our perspective is the majority view in modern NT scholarship:

The mainstream New Testament contributions [regarding the gift of tongues] are largely interested in the religious 'background' to the New Testament phenomenon, and particularly in the question of why tongues appears only to have surfaced as a live congregational issue' in Corinth, and how Paul responded to it. Here the consensus view is that glossolalia [i.e. the real gift of tongues] was not common in the church, and that it is best understood against the more general, especially hellenistic, phenomena of ecstatic (and so unintelligible) speech. ⁴⁵

Therefore, the incoherent, self-edifying version of "tongues" described in 1 Corinthians 14, and which differs from the description of the real gift in Acts and 1 Corinthians 14:22, is best understood as the counterfeit tongues practice common in the temples of the Greek mystery religions of the time, and which was often thought to be demonically inspired.

C) The Apostle's Desire to Abolish Pagan Tongue Utterances & Preserve the Gift of Tongues

There is little doubt then that when the Apostle receives questions concerning ecstatic and incoherent utterances in the Corinthian assembly that he responds, knowing that such a thing is also being practiced throughout the city in the pagan temples. One of the problems, of course, is that the authentic gift of miraculously speaking in foreign human languages could be difficult to distinguish from its pagan counterfeit consisting of obscure utterances. If someone were not present who naturally understood the foreign human language that an authentic Christian tongues utterance occurred in (as in Acts 2), it sounded exactly like the

incoherent, seemingly repetitious syllables uttered by those attending pagan temples.

In other words, it would be like a person speaking Russian to another who only speaks English. There may be meaningful content in the Russian's speech, but that meaning is lost without interpretation, and until it is interpreted the Englishman cannot be sure that the Russian is saying anything at all. Or, in fact, the Russian may be cursing the Englishman.

At this point, it is important to clearly state again a very common misconception that obscures a proper understanding of both the Corinthian tongues and the contemporary version. *Not all tongues are, or ever have been, Christian.* Because many Christians have only encountered the tongues phenomenon in the Bible or a Christian setting, it is widely assumed that tongues are essentially a Christian phenomenon. The excerpt from the *Encyclopedia of Religion* quoted above proves that the modern version of tongues is a world-wide, non-Christian phenomenon, just as it was in Corinth.

Nonetheless, because of the faulty assumption that "praying in a tongue" is only a Christian thing, it is natural to interpret any reference to it in the Scriptures as a reference only to the Christian variety, when in fact, it may be referring to the pagan variety common in the days of the Roman world.

Therefore in 1 Corinthians 12-14 the Apostle has in mind these obscure utterances being spoken in the Corinthian assembly which he generically refers to as speaking in "a tongue." As far as he or any Corinthian knows, some of those utterances are the Christian variety of tongues manifested in miraculously speaking foreign human languages.

However, at least some, and possibly most of the incoherent utterances occurring in the Corinthian assembly were the common, meaningless Greek mystery religion practice of "praying in a tongue." Obviously, neither the Apostle, nor some of the Corinthian leadership wanted pagan, and perhaps demonic practices occurring in the church. We are reminded of God's command to His people long ago: **"Do not worship the LORD your God in the way these pagan peoples worship their gods"** (Deut 12:4 NLT).

Accordingly, C. Fred Dickason, former Chairman of the Department of Theology at Moody Bible Institute comments:

The Corinthians [and the Church today!] were . . . naive and presumptuous. They supposed all miraculous tongues were of God. Paul reminded them that they should have been aware of demonically induced tongues, having observed them while in their former pagan life. This supernatural phenomenon is well known today among pagan religionists. . . . Paul

concentrated on their error in overemphasis on the gift of tongues, which caused neglect of the greater edifying gifts and gave Satan the occasion to infiltrate these believers with a demonic counterfeit.⁴⁶

That the Corinthian church in particular lacked the discernment Dr. Dickason speaks of, is illustrated by the fact that the Apostle Paul used the word *anakrino* ("to examine, investigate, distinguish") ten times in his writings, and every one of them was in 1 Corinthians. Accordingly, the Apostle gives several instructions to both help the Corinthians discern real manifestations of the Holy Spirit, and to abolish those that were not.

First, as noted above, he gives a very straight forward criteria by which to test the source of an utterance in the assembly at the beginning of this section:

Now concerning [*pneumatikon*: "spiritual manifestations"⁴⁷], **brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. . . . Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed;" and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit** (12:1-3).

Here, the Apostle lays down a very important criteria by which spontaneous utterances in the Christian assembly need to be tested: What is its content? This is the reason for his insistence throughout chapter 14 that all obscure utterances either be interpreted for coherent, edifying Christian content, or the would-be speaker should "**keep quiet**" (v. 28).

Secondly, the Apostle speaks to the selfishness inherent in pagan worship, in order to distinguish it from the Christian kind. Professor House writes:

Ecstatic religion by its very nature is self-oriented. Christians were to use their Christian *χαρίσματα* [*charismata*, "gifts"] for the common good [1 Cor 12:7], but the pagans were totally concerned about their own personal experience, an attitude also prevalent among Corinthian Christians.⁴⁸

Accordingly, in the context of instructions for corporate worship, the Apostle tells them that any, "**manifestation of the [Holy] Spirit is given for the common good**" (1 Cor 12:7), not merely for some self-edifying purpose as claimed by *glossaists* today. Then in chapter 13 he tells the Corinthians that even with the greatest spiritual powers imaginable, like speaking the language of Angels, understanding all mysteries, and moving mountains, if love for others does not motivate and empower them then they are useless,

non-Christian, unholy fakes (cf. 13:1-3). He adds that **"Love"** or any legitimate manifestation of the Holy Spirit **"is not self-seeking"** (13:5).

Likewise, in his introduction to chapter 14 he tells them that as they **"eagerly desire spiritual"** manifestations in the assembly, that they must **"Follow the way of love"** (14:1). This would occur by specifically practicing spiritual gifts that edify others (cf. 14:3-6, 19). Such instructions were intended to combat the fact that, as Dr. House says, "pagans were totally concerned about their own personal experience." This is why a few sentences after the Apostle writes that others-oriented love must be followed in the worship service (14:1), he addresses the kind of incoherent tongue speech practiced in the pagan temples and says, **"He who speaks in [that kind of] a tongue edifies himself"** (14:4), which had nothing to do with the Christian religion but everything to do with the pagan kind.

The third way in which the Apostle distinguishes the pagan practice of "praying in a tongue" from the Christian gift of tongues was to note that not all would have the gift, and in fact, probably very few. In the pagan temples, it was quite common for everyone to be making obscure, spontaneous utterances in the worship service.⁴⁹ Therefore, the Apostle points out that not all Christians will even possess the real gift of tongues (cf. 12:17-18, 30), that he used the real gift more than all the Corinthians combined (14:18), and that in any one worship service, only **"two—or at the most three"** (14:27) would-be tongue speakers should speak.

Fourth, the Apostle repeatedly insists on the interpretation of utterances in the Christian assembly in order to expose the fake practice of praying in an obscure, meaningless tongue. Along these lines, F. F. Bruce (1910-1990) comments:

Greece had long experience of the utterances of the Pythian prophetess at Delphi and the enthusiastic invocations of the votaries of Dionysus. Hence Paul insists that it is not the phenomenon of "tongues" or prophesying in itself that gives evidence of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, but the actual content of the utterances.⁵⁰

Again, it is suggested that in 1 Corinthians 12-14, the Apostle desires to eliminate the pagan variety of tongue utterances in the assembly, while preserving the miraculous Christian variety that is **"a sign . . . for unbelievers"** (1 Cor 14:22) if, and when, it is present. Therefore, the Apostle's repeated insistence for interpretation provides additional interpretive keys to understanding 1 Corinthians 14.

More specifically: 1) for the Apostle, there are only two kinds of tongue utterances, *interpreted* and *uninterpreted*, 2) *the only tongue utterance that the Apostle is willing to accept as being the authentic gift of tongues is that which can be, and is miraculously interpreted*, and 3) all uninterpreted utterances were to be politely dismissed as a possible pagan counterfeit which were not to be allowed to operate in the church. The Apostle is not willing to assume these uninterpreted utterances are manifestations of the authentic gift, and he does not want the Corinthians assuming so either.

The Apostle knew that the real gift of tongues produced meaningful content that was to be communicated to all of those present. On the other hand, he also knew that the pagan variety of a "tongue" utterance had no meaningful content and therefore, could not sincerely even be interpreted. Insisting on honest interpretation of obscure utterances in the congregation would preserve the real gift if it were present and eliminate the meaningless pagan variety.

In addition, the Apostle's insistence that would-be tongues speakers "**should keep quiet in the church**" (14:28) and confine their utterance to themselves in the absence of interpretation reveals his God-given genius, and if obeyed, would accomplish all of his goals in this passage. This instruction would: 1) diplomatically eliminate a pagan counterfeit tongue operating in the church service, gently putting illegitimate tongue speakers in their place, 2) satisfy the Corinthians who were concerned about pagan and demonic influence in the assembly (cf. 12:1-3), and 3) preserve the authentic gift if it was present.

If illegitimate tongues speakers were forced to keep their garbled utterances to themselves, the pagan tongue speaking would essentially stop altogether. It is no doubt an empty exercise for a tongue speaker to mindlessly "**speak to himself**" *silently* in meaningless syllables that he does not understand. One only needs to imagine such a thing to expect that those doing so would eventually abandon the practice altogether.

In fact, we would seem to have good evidence that the Apostle's strategy worked. When Clement of Rome (died c. 99) writes another letter of correction to the Corinthians some forty years after the Apostle's letter, there is no mention whatsoever of the "tongue" phenomenon.

A fifth way in which the Apostle distinguishes between the authentic Christian gift of tongues and the pagan practice of "praying in a tongue" is to expose the mindless nature of the latter. Therefore, he tells the Corinthians:

I will pray with my [human] spirit, but I will also [at the same time ⁵¹] pray with my mind; I will sing with my [human] spirit, but I will also [at the same time] sing with my mind (14:15).

This is because if he prays with only his human "spirit" (i.e. emotions) like the pagans, "**my mind is unfruitful** (*akarpos*: unproductive, barren)" (14:14), which is not a good or Christian thing, but a pagan thing. We notice again that the Apostle describes this practice as merely occurring in the human "**spirit**," not the Holy Spirit. ⁵² While pagan worship involved only the person's "**spirit**," (i.e. emotions), the only legitimate way for a Christian to pray and sing was with both the "**spirit**" and the mind (i.e. understanding). ⁵³

Accordingly, the Apostle Peter commanded this when he wrote, "**be of sound judgment** [*sōphronēsate*] **and sober** [*nēpsate*] **spirit for the purpose of prayer**" (1 Pet 4:7 NASB). The Apostle Paul is essentially saying, "I would do something better than mindlessly, uselessly, and selfishly just pray or sing with my spirit like the pagans do, I will also pray and sing with my mind so I and others know what I'm praying and singing!"

A sixth, and very clear statement the Apostle makes in 1 Corinthians 12-14 to distinguish the pagan practice of "praying in a tongue" from the authentic Christian gift of tongues was to affirm emphatically that the gift of "**Tongues . . . are a [miraculous] sign . . . for unbelievers**" (14:22), just as they are described in Acts. Obviously, the pagan variety which was merely incoherent gibberish would not impress unbelievers as a sign of anything God would be doing.

Seventh, because pagan worshippers who seemed to be the most *ecstatic* were considered to be the most spiritual, the Apostle insisted on self-control in the Christian service. Dr. House explains:

Contemporary descriptions take note of the fact that such self-control was totally lacking in the orgiastic ecstasies of the mystery cults. Hence, these safeguards would protect the church by distinguishing the counterfeit from the genuine manifestations of the Holy Spirit. . . . In the pagan glossolalia [tongue speaking], no thought was given to the harmony of participants in group worship. Only the individual experience was important. Paul wrote that unity is a sign of the Spirit's activity. ⁵⁴

Therefore, the Apostle instructed that no more than two or three people with the real Christian gift of tongues were to speak in the service, and then only one at a time (cf. 14:27). If anyone were to

prophesy they were not to do so in an uncontrollable frenzy like the heathen prophets but with self “**control**” (14:32). Likewise, because pagan worship services tended to be chaotic and disorderly the Apostle reminded the Corinthians that “**God is not a God of disorder but of peace,**” and that “**women should remain silent in the churches**” (14:33-34).

There are some obvious applications here for the situation we have today. Spontaneous, obscure, and meaningless utterances occur in non-Christian religious worship all over the world, some of which are in obviously demonic environments. If the Apostle was concerned with pagan and/or demonic influence in the Corinthian congregation, it would seem understandable some would have the same concern for *glossaist* congregations today.

Therefore, we readily see the danger of redefining the gift of tongues into something that is not to be understood by others. The authenticity of the utterance can only be determined by its content, and the *glossaist* redefinition conveniently removes the ability to confirm that its source is the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we, like the Apostle Paul, have no reason to believe such utterances are of the Holy Spirit at all, and elsewhere we suggest several alternative explanations for the phenomenon today.⁵⁵

Extras & Endnotes

Gauging Your Grasp

- 1) What is the “religious context” of 1 Corinthians 12-14?
- 2) What evidence in the text do we suggest reflects Paul’s concern about the influence of pagan mystery religion practices?
- 3) What were the several reasons the Apostle wanted obscure utterances in the assembly to be interpreted?
- 4) What is the significance of the fact that what the Apostle describes in 1 Corinthians 14 as a spontaneous, obscure, meaningless utterance, was commonly observed in the temple worship of the Greek mystery religions operating in abundance at the time? How do we suggest this should affect our interpretation of it? Do you agree or disagree and why?

- 5) How would the faulty assumption that "praying in a tongue" is only a Christian thing obscure a correct understanding of its mention in 1 Corinthians 12-14?
- 6) In what ways are the Corinthians' lack of discernment illustrated in 1 Corinthians?
- 7) What is our three point basic outline of 1 Corinthians 14. Do you agree or disagree and why?

Publications & Particulars

-
- ¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th edition, (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968), Vol. 8, 75 (Underlining added for emphasis).
 - ² Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT)* (Eerdmans, 1987), 3.
 - ³ John MacArthur, *First Corinthians* (Moody Press, 1984), 196-197, 280.
 - ⁴ Raymond F. Collins, *1 Corinthians* (Sacra Pagina, 1999), 447.
 - ⁵ Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity And Its Hellenistic Environment Prophecy* (J. C. B. Mohr, 1995), 136-8.
 - ⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Westminster Press, 1975), 304
 - ⁷ *Glossolalia* is the technical term for the spontaneous, obscure, and unintelligible utterances observed particularly in religious settings from ancient history, to the modern times, and throughout the world. It is derived from the Greek words *glossa* (tongue, language), and *lalos* (speak), and literally means "language speaking."
However, modern linguists agree that glossolalia is not a real human language. Accordingly, while *glossolalia* is an apt term for the unintelligible utterances occurring in the modern tongues movement, *xenolalia* (derived from the Greek *zenos*: "foreign"), is used to refer to the supernatural ability to speak in a foreign human language which you have not learned naturally, and is a better technical term for the biblical gift of tongues.
 - ⁸ Grant Osborne, "Tongues," in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (EDT)*, Walter Elwell, ed., (Baker, 1984), 1100.
 - ⁹ Dunn, 304. Dunn is relating the thoughts of T. W. Gillespie, "A Pattern of Prophetic Speech in First Corinthians", *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 97, no. 1, 1978, pp. 74-95 p. 82.
 - ¹⁰ *New Bible Dictionary (NBD)*, J. I. Packer, et al. eds., 3rd ed., (Intervarsity, 1996), 225-226.
 - ¹¹ *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)*,

Colin Brown, ed., 4 vols., (Zondervan, 1986), 3:1079.

¹² Robert Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967), 110.

¹³ Joseph Dillow, *Speaking in Tongues* (Zondervan, 1975), 12-13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 189-90.

¹⁵ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, "Glossolalia," Mircea Eliade ed., 16 vols. (Macmillan, 1987), V:562-565. (underlining added for emphasis). Dr. Thomas Edgar claims that the 14th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* also describes some obviously demonically controlled instances of tongues speaking (*Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit* [Kregel, 1996], 219).

¹⁶ Christopher Forbes, Professor of NT and Hellenistic History at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia has specifically questioned just how extensive speaking in obscure, spontaneous utterances was, in first century pagan religions, in his book *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity And Its Hellenistic Environment* (J. C. B. Mohr, 1995).

This is rather remarkable as we have quoted from his very own book, descriptions of pagan prophetesses chanting "dread enigmas . . . wrapping truth in darkness" and groaning as they "uttered loud inarticulate cries." It would seem especially the last reference certainly describes something that most people then and today would equate with the spontaneous and obscure speech that has become known as speaking in a tongue.

While the overwhelming majority of experts on the subject disagree with Dr. Forbes, he has at least convinced some. For example, Max Turner writes:

The outcome of Forbes' detailed research is that there was no widespread hellenistic phenomenon of ecstatic and linguistically incoherent speech to provide a background for the Corinthian problems. (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* [Hendrickson, 1998], 237)

Likewise, Anthony Thiselton writes in his more recent commentary on 1 Corinthians: "Forbes proves conclusively and beyond doubt" that spontaneous and obscure utterances were not practiced as a sign of spirituality or communion with a god in the first century Greek mystery religions, nor can they be applied to an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12-14 (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 2000], 980). Yet even Dr. Thiselton seems contradictory, and is at least confusing on his view of Dr. Forbes when he earlier writes:

Forbes convincingly disposes of narrower, overly specific understandings of [1 Corinthians] 12:1-2, but he does not entirely undermine the broader points made by Earle Ellis and others about the probable connections between 12:1-2 and different understandings of inspired speech and criteria for distinguishing between authentic and evil sources of "spiritual" influences [cf. E. E. Ellis, "Spiritual Gifts" and "Christ and Spirit in I Cor," in *Prophecy and*

Hermeneutic, esp. 25 and 70-71; cf. 25-44 and 63-71].

Again, in our view the pre-Christian and Christian frameworks constitute comparative frames of reference within which respective criteria for what it means to be [*pneumatikos*] operate. Each of these views may offer nuances of the contrast, but Forbes rightly questions whether all of the weight can be placed on the modern consensus view.

For all of his support of Dr. Forbes, then, in the end, Dr. Thiselton seems to agree with "the modern consensus view" that documents describing the religious practices in the Greek mystery religions do indeed have a bearing on properly interpreting 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Perhaps Dr. Forbes is correct in pointing out that at least some of the examples that J. Behm used from ancient Greek sources in his very influential article on *glossais* (tongues) in the highly regarded *Theological Dictionary New Testament Theology* are questionable, and that, in fact, other examples used of "inspired utterances" in pagan religious rites may not have been speaking in a spontaneous and obscure tongue.

In particular, his point that prophecies in the Greek mystery cults were most often given in plain, understandable language, is well taken. In addition, we appreciate Dr. Forbes' support against particularly liberal German scholars from the "history of religions school" who claim that the early Church derived its understanding of the gift of tongues from Greek religious cults.

Finally, we agree with both Dr. Forbes and Robert H. Gundry that, "Christian glossolalia was [not] phenomenologically similar to inspired speech in Hellenistic religion." (*Prophecy*, 19). The former involved real human languages, and the latter was merely gibberish. This is why we think the Apostle is intentionally trying to distinguish the two phenomena in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Therefore, Dr. Forbes would seem wrong to discount the value that descriptions of Greek mystery religious practices have on an interpretation of this passage, when he says, "the [pagan] phenomena themselves can be shown to be substantially different from glossolalia as it was understood and/or practiced within early Christianity" (170). Of course, but the pagan practices very well resemble the spontaneous, obscure, self-centered utterances that the Apostle labels an unknown tongue.

Dr. Forbes has two main objections to the scholarly consensus on the nature of spontaneous, obscure utterances in the pagan mystery religions: 1) Many of the sources are either sometime before or after the first century, and 2) the interpretation of obscure utterances in the descriptions of ancient pagan worship is wrong (*Prophecy*, 169-70).

Regarding his first concern, sources for *everything* pertaining to Greek life in the first century, let alone secret religious rights, is relatively scarce in the period "from about 50 A.D. to 150 A.D.," which Dr. Forbes wishes to base his conclusions on. Simply put, there is relatively little non-Christian literature on *anything* during this period. Therefore, scholars often and legitimately conclude from a few references in such literature that a phenomenon was popular enough to surface in the

relatively few historical documents we possess.

Nevertheless, the reference above from Lucan (c. 39-65 A. D.) of a prophetess who "uttered loud inarticulate cries" is from the first century and Origen's (c. 220) testimony to the same thing supports the consensus that this kind of thing persisted through the early history of the Church. Likewise, much of the material from which the debated conclusions are made is dated as early as the second century, and it is not irrational, as Dr. Forbes suggests, to conclude that similar phenomena occurred in the first century. Scholars, in fact, obtain much of what they infer regarding first century life from historical documents dated in the second century. This is again, because *any* documents dating from the first century are relatively very rare.

Finally, even Dr. Forbes admits that there is at least one "pre-Christian Hellenistic" description of "inspired speech of a prophet/mantis as resembling a foreign language" (116). We think there are plenty more, but even if there were one in such literature, Dr. Forbes' denial of any relationship between such phenomena and the obscure, supposedly spiritual "tongue" speech in Corinth is far too confident.

Therefore, his claim that "between the middle of the first and the end of the second century A.D. several fairly basic changes occurred in beliefs related to our area of interest" is much more debatable than he lets on and is severely weakened when his "central" argument concerns a supposed "widespread rise in the credibility of the miraculous, and an increasing fascination with occult and ecstatic phenomena, especially as evidence of divine powers" (2).

First, there would seem to be an intentional disregard for Origen's testimony in the second century, of which there is no evidence of the bias Dr. Forbes suggests. Secondly, we fear Dr. Forbes' conclusion is based merely on the existence of more *documents* in the second and third centuries (and therefore more references to such things), compared to the first, rather than an actual change in religious tastes among pagan religions. It is precisely because of the paucity of documents in the first century describing practices in the Greek mystery religions, that nobody can postulate any change occurring in the second century.

Thirdly, even if the supposed changes Dr. Forbes lists were real, it does nothing to disprove the scholarly consensus that spontaneous, obscure utterances like those described by the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 14 were popular among first century practitioners in the Greek mystery religions, including those in Corinth. This is undoubtedly the case in documents leading up to the first century, and those in the second and third centuries.

We would also object to Dr. Forbes' claim that scholars have misinterpreted references to obscure, spontaneous utterances in ancient Greek mystery religions. In fact, his own interpretations strike us as biased in order to prove his point.

For example, we have already quoted Celsus in the second century describing "inspired persons" in the pagan religions who "added strange, fanatical, and quite unintelligible words, of which no rational person can find the meaning: for so dark are they, as to have no meaning at all."

Celsus is believed to have written this around 175 A.D., which, in our opinion, given the nature of ancient historical documents, makes it a valuable source of information as to what would have been occurring in the first century.

Nonetheless, Dr. Forbes' bias regarding a statement interpreted by most scholars as describing the very thing he wishes to deny is evidenced by his claim 1) that Origen possibly "worked over the material he presents, thus making it unreliable," and 2) "the passage of the Contra Celsum from which this understanding is drawn is quite clearly the most violently polemical part of Celsus' portrayal of the "prophets," being loaded with emotive terminology. It is thus the most likely to be distorted" (25). It is, of course, convenient for Dr. Forbes to suggest that both Origen and Celsus "distorted" their reporting so that they cannot be entered as evidence in the debate, but we think most readers would agree that he is perhaps the one who is attempting to distort things at times.

Likewise, Dr. Forbes quotes from Dio Chrysostom (c. 40-120 A. D.), who certainly wrote in or closely after the first century, regarding the "heavenly languages" spoken by inspired people in the mystery cults:

Do you think Apollo speaks Attic or Doric? Or that man and gods have the same language? Yet the difference is so great that . . . from this it naturally follows that the oracles are obscure. (*Discourse* 10.23).

This would clearly seem to be a reference to obscure "inspired" speech of a prophetic "oracle." Nonetheless, Dr. Forbes claims without justification and unreasonably that the obscurity is not in the "heavenly language," but remains after it has been "translated from the divine language into the normal human language" (115) of the "inspired" person. Again, this is both unsubstantiated and unreasonable.

Although other examples could be given where Dr. Forbes employs an unnecessary bias, and goes against the consensus of modern scholarship, (cf. 127-128, incl. n. 7; 130; 132; 157; 161; 162-3), one more may suffice. Dr. Forbes quotes the Church Father Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-216) who writes that:

Plato attributes a dialect also to the gods, forming this conjecture mainly from dreams and oracles [of Greek prophets], and especially from demoniacs, who do not speak their own language or dialect, but that of the demons who have taken possession of them. (*Stromata*, 1.21)

Dr. Forbes denies the evidence here of a "tongue like" phenomenon and writes, "Nothing here suggests oracles spoke in 'other tongues,' human, divine, or angelic/demonic" (115). Yet, that is precisely what Plato is describing.

While Dr. Thiselton has apparently been convinced against modern scholarship, most have not. Dr. Carson who quotes other portions of Dr. Forbes' work, still concludes that some of the Corinthians' skepticism toward the tongues phenomenon in their church, "arose from their own pagan backgrounds" (*Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* [Baker, 1987], 26).

David Aune, perhaps the most respected scholar on the subject, also confirms that, "It must be recognized that unintelligible utterances were often part of prophetic speech in the ancient world" (*Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Mediterranean World* [Eerdmans, 1983], 199). Dr. Aune also argues like we have that in 1 Corinthians 12:2 Paul "was in all probability referring to pagan religious experiences of possession trance." (195; see also 42, note 221; 72, note 133; and 257.

See also Grant R. Osborne, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. For earlier in-depth studies of the issues involved see N. I. J. Engelsen, *Glossolalia and Other Forms of Inspired Speech According to 1 Corinthians 12-14*, unpublished thesis, Yale, 1970 and T. W. Gillespie, "A Pattern of Prophetic Speech in First Corinthians," *JBL*, vol. 97, no. 1, 1978.

It can also be mentioned that Dr. Forbes completely ignores the fact that a tongue phenomenon of obscure, spontaneous utterances exists worldwide today in very ancient and non-Christian religions.

Finally, we also disagree with Dr. Forbes' exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12-14 in which he fails to recognize the contexts described here in KOG and concludes that the gift of tongues was *both* miraculously speaking foreign human languages with inspired content (63) and "inspired prayer" (57). In his words, he claims, "[We] are forced to recognize that Paul viewed glossolalia as being capable of supporting a variety of functions, differing primarily according to the context within which it was exercised" (98). We believe this is clearly refuted in Book 2.6.

¹⁷ "Gifts" is normally supplied here by translators even though *charisma* is not in the Greek text. *Pneumatikon* which is the Greek word here is much better translated as "spiritual things" or "manifestations", as the RSV does in 14:12. A fuller discussion of this important interpretive key to 1 Corinthians 12-14 is provided in section 12.8.A.

¹⁸ NT scholar J. D. G. Dunn comments on 12:3:
It would be difficult to deny that this verse provides one particular rule of thumb for evaluating spiritual utterances. It is quite likely, though many disagree, that during the Corinthian worship some member(s) of the assembly had cried out under inspiration, 'Jesus be cursed!' (234).

¹⁹ Carson, *Spirit*, 18, 26, 30.

²⁰ For example, *apagomenoi* is used repeatedly to describe how Christ was forcefully led around by the Roman soldiers on the day of His crucifixion. Accordingly, we read, "**They bound Him, led Him away [apēgagon] and handed Him over to Pilate, the governor. . . . Then they led Him away [apēgagon] to crucify Him.** (Matt 27:2, 31; cf. Matt 26:57; Mark 14:44, 53; 15:16; Luke 23:26; 13:15; John 19:16). Therefore, its use in 1 Corinthians 12:2 implies significant demonic influence.

²¹ Chrysostom, *Homily on 1 Corinthians*, 29; online at www.ccel.org

²² C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC) (Hendrickson, 2000), 278-279. Raymond F. Collins in his well regarded commentary

agrees and says:

More likely the phrase is one that had been spoken by non-Christians in Corinth. . . . The Christian presumption is that such a curse was uttered under demonic influence (446).

²³ Aune, 257.

²⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Eerdmans, 1970), 286-87.

²⁵ We would suggest that Dr. Grudem's claim that the Apostle is talking about being physically "carried" to the idol temples, instead of being emotionally carried away in idol worship, as typically occurs in the *Glossaist* worship he seeks to defend, reveals an unfortunate bias (cf. *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*, 162-64), and Dr. Thiselton is right to label it "novel" and "cannot readily be proven." (912)

For a great deal more discussion regarding the pagan *emotionalism* common in much of the worship practices of *charismaticism* see chapters 4.10-11.

²⁶ Fee, 577-578 (italics in the original).

²⁷ H. Wayne House, "Tongues and the Mystery Religions at Corinth," *BSac* 140, [1983], 138, 140-1.

²⁸ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (Eerdmans, 2004), 205, 207

²⁹ Grudem, 1077-78.

³⁰ It would seem that Dr. Grudem completely ignores both the contexts and Greek text of the Scriptures he speaks of, aspects that we will discuss further in this chapter and the next, but will address here in his writing.

Dr. Grudem's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12:1-3 here is misleading. It is true that *if* someone is truly speaking by the Holy Spirit, we need not be concerned about the nature of the utterance. But Dr. Grudem blindly assumes that the Apostle thought every incoherent utterance spoken in the Corinthian assembly could *only* be by the Spirit of God. An assumption that both the pagan religious context and the Greek text (the use of *pneumatika* esp.; see below at section F) convincingly argue against.

Dr. Grudem will not allow for any possibility of demonic influence in the Corinthian situation, nor in the tongues phenomenon today. Yet, it is interesting to note what he writes in an earlier section of his *Systematic Theology* concerning demonic influence in a Christian's life:

If we ask how much demonic influence can come into the life of a genuine Christian, it is hard to give an answer in the abstract. We are simply asking how abnormal a Christian's life can become, especially if that person does not know about or make use of the weapons of spiritual warfare that are available to Christians, persists in some kinds of sin that give entrance to demonic activity, and is outside the reach of any ministry that is accustomed to giving spiritual help against demonic attack or influence. It would seem that in such cases the degree of demonic attack or influence in a

Christian's life could be quite strong. It would not be correct to say there can be no such influence because the person is a Christian (424).

It is suggested here and demonstrated elsewhere that *glossaic* practices could very well suffice for persistence "in some kinds of sin that give entrance to demonic activity." This is in light of Christ's words condemning meaningless, incoherent, pagan-like babbling as a form of prayer (Matt 6:7-9; cf. 12.11.C), the Apostle Paul's words condemning mindless prayer (1 Cor 14:14-15; cf. section 12.11.A); speaking a tongue utterance that will not be interpreted (14:27-28; cf. section 12.9.A); and women publicly speaking in a tongue at all (14:33-34; cf. section 12.5.A.4); all of these being against "**the Lord's command**" (14:37); and becoming sin if violated. Nevertheless, Dr. Grudem continues in his defense of modern tongues:

Some books have given accounts of Christians who say they spoke in tongues for a time and then found that there was a demon within them who was empowering this speech, and the demon was cast out. But this is just another example of a case where experience is to be subject to Scripture and tested by Scripture, and the teaching of Scripture should not be subject to experience. We must be careful that we not let such reports of experiences cause us to adopt a different position than Scripture itself on this issue.

Specifically, if [if indeed] 1 Cor. 12-14 views tongues as a good gift from the Holy Spirit that is valuable for [self] edification and for the good of the church, and if Paul can say, "I want you all to speak in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:5), then interpretations of contemporary experiences that, in effect, say, "I want you all to be afraid of tongues" go contrary to the emphasis of the New Testament.

Again, Dr. Grudem completely ignores the religious context of 1 Corinthians 12-14 in which not all spiritual manifestations in the Corinthians assembly are from the Holy Spirit. Secondly, he does not notice the Apostle's intentional switching back and forth from "a tongue" to a "tongues" to differentiate between the real and the counterfeit version (cf. section F below).

Therefore, as discussed more thoroughly elsewhere, when the Apostle says he wishes all of them to speak in "tongues" (*glossais*), he is obviously not talking about the incoherent, self-edifying, pagan *glosse*, but the authentic gift of *glossais* that he says is a Sign gift for Jewish unbelievers (14:21-22; cf. section 12.3.B). Therefore, Paul's statement needs to be understood in this context, and is not an enthusiastic encouragement to blindly and hotly pursue a practice that resembled what the pagan cults were doing in that day, in that city, as it would seem Grudem would have his readers believe.

In summary, we might take comfort in Dr. Grudem's reassurances that we *never* need to be afraid of a demonic counterfeit tongues in a Christian assembly *if* his interpretation of these biblical texts were more accurate.

³¹ Fee, 632, and n. 30. See also *NIDNTT*, 3:76, 112 and Barrett, 300.

³² House, 141

³³ For a full discussion of the phenomena of *emotionalism* and how it relates to *glossaism* see chapters 4.11.

³⁴ Contrary to the *glossaist's* insistence that only the Holy Spirit is involved in the phenomena being described in 1 Corinthians 14, the Apostle often references merely the human spirit in this passage (cf. 14:2; 14-16) when describing what is occurring. For further discussion see section 12.9.A.

³⁵ House, 141. See also Mark Harding, "Church and Gentile Cults in Corinth" *Grace Theological Journal* 10:2 (Fall 1989), 216-19.

³⁶ Glenn W. Barker, "Mystery," in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)* Geoffrey W. Bromiley ed., 4 vols., (Eerdmans, 1988), 3:451.

³⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book II, ch. 23, Book V. ch. 6.1; online at www.ccel.org.

³⁸ See endnote above

³⁹ Christopher Forbes denies this, but surprisingly ignores the great difference between the Christian and pagan view of a religious "mystery" and therefore draws the conclusion that the Apostle could only be speaking of the Christian view of "mystery" here (96-7). For further discussion of 1 Corinthians 14:2 see chapter 12.9.

⁴⁰ For modern examples of tongue speaking showing up in embarrassing public media see section 4.11.D.

⁴¹ J. Schattenmann, "Ecstasy" in *NIDNTT*, 1:529. Some have claimed that the response of these hypothetical Corinthian unbelievers is best described as perplexity because they would never have been exposed to such a phenomenon, thus proving that tongues were not practiced in pagan temples at the time.

This ignores a good deal of evidence to the contrary. Their accusation of "madness" refers directly to what these unbelievers would have witnessed in a pagan temple when speaking in a tongue was occurring. For additional examples of *mainesthai* (madness) being used to describe ancient Greek worship practices see Fee, n. 55, 685 and *NIDNTT*, 1:528. L. T. Johnson agrees with our interpretation as well (see *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* [Augsburg Fortress, 1998], 115).

⁴² Fee, 685

⁴³ L. T. Johnson, "Tongues, Gift of" *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman ed. 8 vols. (Doubleday, 1992), I:598

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Experience*, 126. Not surprisingly, Dr. Forbes goes against a face value reading of much of 1st and 2nd century Greek religious literature:

I suggest further that in Paul's view the "unbelievers" in question would describe glossolalia as "raving", not because it was familiar to them as a sign of divine inspiration, but precisely because it was not. As a thoroughly strange and inexplicable phenomenon, it would probably be interpreted by them as evidence of some form of divine activity. As such it might be frightening, off-putting, or merely strange. (174)

This appears to be a biased view in order to support his thesis as described above.

⁴⁵ Turner, 221

⁴⁶ C. Fred Dickason, *Demon Possession & the Christian* (Crossway Books, 1987), 126.

⁴⁷ "Gifts" is normally supplied here by translators even though *charisma* is not in the Greek text. *Pneumatikon* which is the Greek word here is much better translated as "spiritual things" or "manifestations", as the RSV does in 14:12. A fuller discussion of this important interpretive key to 1 Corinthians 12-14 will be provided below.

⁴⁸ House, 141.

⁴⁹ Regarding a time somewhat later, Dr. Forbes reports:

The use of drums, cymbals and flutes is a recurrent theme in the orgiastic worship of Cybele, as is frenzied shouting. . . . That various forms of shouting, along with violent physical activity, were characteristic of Dionysian worship in [the early centuries A.D.] is amply attested in our sources. . . . [A]n abnormal state of mind [for] participants in Dionysian rituals . . . is normally assumed . . . [and] a feature of the rituals, and . . . this state is accompanied by violent physical activity and/or shouting.

Several very clear statements of this are to be found in Latin literature of the first century B.C. The best known of these is the account given by Livy of the "Bacchanalian Conspiracy" of 187-6 B.C. Livy writes as follows:

[I]nitiatory rites which at first were imparted to a few, then began to be generally known among men and women. . . . [A]mid the howlings and the crash of drums and cymbals no cry could be heard. . . . Men, as if insane, with fanatical tossings of their bodies, would utter prophecies. . . . [T]here are men very like the women, debauched and debauchers, fanatical, with senses dulled by . . . noise and shouts at night.

A pattern is clearly evident here. The features that are considered characteristic of the cults of Dionysus and Cybele are outbursts of shouting, the music of cymbals, drums and flutes, and frenzied dancing, sometimes also accompanied by frenzied cries (124).

⁵⁰ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans, 2000), 260.

⁵¹ Dr. Thiselton notes:

Paul argues equally against uncritical "enthusiasm," uncritical

"renewal" traditions, or uncritical mysticism on one side and against gnostics, theological theorists, or any who seek to intellectualize Christian faith into a mere belief system on the other. Christians are confronted not by an either ... or ... but by a both ... and.

He adds that the *BAGD* interprets the Greek of the latter half of v. 15: "sing praise in spiritual ecstasy and in full possession of one's mental faculties." (1111).

⁵² See endnote above

⁵³ For further discussion of the fact that praying without understanding is unbiblical see chapter 12.11.

⁵⁴ House, 146.

⁵⁵ For several alternative and alarming explanations for the tongues phenomenon today see chapter 12.14.