

Excerpts of Archived Lecture:

TONGUES – PAGAN OR PENTECOSTAL?

By Melvin D. Curry

Faith healers and tongues-speakers are even popular with middle class America these days. In fact, as Ed Harrell has noted, some religious researchers predict that by the year 2000 at least half of the Protestants will have accepted the charismatic religion. . .

Christianity and paganism offered the Corinthians two entirely different models of tongues-speaking: the *Pentecostal Model*, which involved speaking in identifiable foreign languages or dialects, and the *Pagan Model*, which involved speaking in ecstatic tongues. On the one hand, the term “Pentecost” is being misappropriated by those who speak in ecstatic tongues, for the modern charismatic phenomena called “tongues” do not fit the Pentecostal Model in Acts 2. On the other hand, all ecstatic tongues correspond to the ancient Pagan Model through and through. In fact, there were many pagan tongues-speakers in the vicinity of Corinth. Perhaps, there were even some of them in the church. Thus, counterfeit tongues-speaking, similar to the modern variety, was one of the many pagan influences that first century Christians had to confront.

Many additional pagan practices threatened the churches of the first century, and some of them persist to the present time. In essence, the whole worldly and immoral climate of paganism gradually eroded the values of early Christians. And today’s emphasis on self-gratifying emotions in religion is neo-pagan rather than Biblical. Indeed, the effects of neo-paganism in the twentieth century may be seen on every hand. Everything from situation ethics to homosexuality is currently being justified by appeals to Greek and Roman precedents. In short, both then and now, the Lord’s people have been and continue to be in a deadly fight against the encroaching practices of paganism.

A Biblical Example of Paganism

The contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:25–40) epitomizes the essential difference between Biblical and pagan forms of religion as well as between rational and irrational approaches to worship. Elijah's actions were uncomplicated, logical, and rational. He offered a simple prayer of faith, "Hear me, O Jehovah, hear me, that this people may know that thou, Jehovah, art God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again" (v. 37). And Jehovah answered his prayer. But the actions of the prophets of Baal were irrational. They tarried all day long at the altar and prayed repeatedly with emotional outbursts, "O Baal, hear us!" (v. 26) Moreover, their prayer was accompanied by intense religious fervor. They "leaped about the altar" and "cut themselves with knives and lances, till the blood gushed out upon them" (vv. 26, 28). But there was no response from Baal.

Eugene H. Peterson's essay *Baalism and Yahwism Updated* provides us not only with the backdrop for understanding Elijah's rival but also with a fascinating discussion of the ingredients which made paganism so appealing:

The emphasis of Baalism was on psychophysical relatedness. The gulf between man and God was leveled out of existence by means of participatory rites. The terrifying majesty of God, his "other ness," was assimilated to the religious passions of the worshiper. The god of the bull image, the god of wine, the god of the fertility figurine was the god of relevance, fulfilling personal needs with convincing immediacy. The desires that inflamed the soul were fulfilled in the cultic act of worship. The transcendence of the deity was overcome in the ecstasy of feeling. (139)

Thus, Baal worship focused on "sensory participation" and was accompanied by music, dance, and sacred prostitution. Indeed, as Peterson observes, "Sexual activity in the cult was frequent since it achieved the primary Baalistic goal so completely—the ecstatic plunge of the whole sensory person into the passion of the religious moment" (139).

The reaction of the prophets of Israel was to call Baal worship "harlotry" (Jer. 5:7, 13; Ezek. 16 and 23). A more graphic term could not have been chosen, and Peterson goes on to show how suitable it was:

It referred to worship that sought fulfillment through self-expression, worship that accepted the needs and desires and passions of the worshiper as its raw material. "Harlotry" is worship which says, "I will give you satisfaction. You want religious feelings? I will give them to you. You want your needs fulfilled? I'll do it in the form most attractive to you." (140)

By way of contrast, the worship of Jehovah appealed directly to the will of man. While stirring the entire spectrum of human emotions, it never incorporated the irrational extremes to which paganism went. "Yahwism," writes Peterson, "exerted continuous pressure to elevate worship into the sphere of conscious intelligence and clearly defined concepts" (140). Yet Baalism's appeal can nowhere be more clearly seen than in its ability to carry away God's people time and again by religious enthusiasm. The majority of them were turned off by the simple forms of Hebrew religion. They wanted something more exciting, more dynamic, and more relevant. Bored with their lot in life and frustrated by their perplexing problems, they continually grasped for something different.

Granted, Baalism is an extreme example of irrational religion. Nevertheless, it highlights the psychological goals of paganism, namely, pantheistic union and divine possession.

The Pentecostal Model

Acts 2 is explicit in its description of the "tongues" (*glossai*) which were spoken by the apostles. The context clearly indicates that tongues are known foreign languages. When the apostles spoke with "other tongues" (*heterais glossais*, v. 4), "every man heard them speaking in his own language (*dialectos*, dialect, v. 6). And a dialect is defined as the "form of a language peculiar to a locality or group" of human beings. Again, the people asked, "Behold, are not all these that speak Galilaeans? And how hear we, every man in our own language (*dialectos*, dialect) wherein we were born" (v. 8)? After Luke lists the various nationalities of those present, he quotes the people's astonished remark, "We hear them speaking in our tongues (*glossais*) the mighty works of God" (v. 11). The tongues spoken by the apostles, therefore, were the various dialects with which the people present were conversant. **Thus, when the term Pentecostal is used to describe tongues-speaking, it implies that the tongues under consideration are known human languages. This is what I mean by the Pentecostal Model. To classify unintelligible sounds as Pentecostal involves a total disregard of this model that was provided by God Himself.**

Furthermore, the tongues of Acts 2, along with "the sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind," served as *signs* to authenticate the apostolic message. When the people heard the apostles "speaking in tongues the mighty works of God" (v. 11), they understood exactly what they were saying. God bore "witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers of the Holy Spirit" (Heb. 2:4).

Had not Jesus said, “These signs shall accompany them that believe: in my name . . . They shall speak with new tongues” (Mark 16:17–18). And notice the effect these signs had on the audience of unbelieving Jews. They were “confounded,” “amazed,” “marveled,” and “perplexed” at the possibility of the impossible as they wondered how these Galileans could speak in their languages. In other words, their minds were made to look exactly in the direction in which God’s signs were pointing.

Peter explains that what was happening was in direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. “This is that which hath been spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:15). The Jews had long awaited the Messianic Age, and they knew to associate the salvation to be enjoyed during that age with Joel’s prediction that God would “pour out” His Spirit “upon all flesh” (Joel 2:28–32). The pouring out of the Spirit served as a sign that sinners could now “call on the name of Jehovah” and “be delivered” (v. 32). The Age of Deliverance had commenced. What the Jews were seeing and hearing was the pouring forth of the Holy Spirit by *Jesus of Nazareth*, whom God had made “both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:33–36). The man they had executed as a common criminal was the expected Messiah, the Lord of salvation. Those who were convinced by the signs they had seen and heard cried out to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?”

What happened on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus had truly marked the “beginning” of the Messianic Age. But the promise of salvation was for “all flesh”; it extended to Gentiles as well as Jews. Notice that the tongues spoken by Cornelius and his company were as intelligible to those present as the tongues spoken at Pentecost were to those who were there on that occasion. Luke says, “They heard them . . . Magnify God” (Acts 10:46). The Jews understood what the Gentiles said; therefore, no ecstatic gibberish was spoken by the Gentiles or heard by the Jewish brethren. Thus, they were willing to accept them as brothers in Christ. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Jews and Gentiles showed that “God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35).

The Pagan Model

Many Christians in Corinth brought their pagan past into the body of Christ. Ecstatic or enthusiastic behavior was one of the most insidious forms of paganism faced by these early churches. Whether or not the Corinthian church actually had pagan tongues-speakers in its midst is a debatable matter, but, unquestionably, the tendency of some Christians to misuse spiritual gifts gave the appearance of mixing some pagan forms of worship with the assembly activities of the church.

Wayne House isolates three principal sources of ecstatic tongues-speaking in the vicinity of Corinth: “the Cybele-Attis cult, the Dionysian cult (both mystery religions), and the religion of Apollo” (137).

Furthermore, Montanus, the second century heretic was known for his ecstatic utterances. Eusebius records the following description of Montanus' madness: "He was carried away in spirit, and wrought up into a certain kind of frenzy and irregular ecstasy, raving, and speaking, and uttering strange things" (*Ecclesiastical History*, Bk. V, ch. 16). Eusebius also says that Montanus "excited two others, females, and filled them with the spirit of delusion, so that they also spake like the former, in a kind of ecstatic frenzy" (*Ecclesiastical History*, Bk. V, ch. 16).

When we consider that pagan "Greece had neither a Bible nor a Church," observes Dodds," we are in a position readily to understand "why Apollo ... came to fill the gap. Without Delphi, Greek society could scarcely have endured the tensions to which it was subjected in the Archaic Age" (75). However, some point to the writings of Homer as the Bible of the ancient Greek world. And, as such, it would have even reinforced the Pagan Model of tongues-speaking.

There were numerous shrines to Apollo scattered throughout Greece; in fact, several temples of Apollo at one time or another have been known to exist in Corinth. But the most famous shrine of Apollo was at Delphi. There an inspired priestess, called a Pithia, received divine revelations. Luke records that Paul and his companions encountered one such medium in Philippi. "A certain maid having a spirit of divination (a python) met us," he says, "who brought her masters much gain by soothsaying" (Acts 16:16). The god Apollo "entered into her and used her vocal organs as if they were his own," writes Dodds, and "that is why Apollo's Delphic utterances are always couched in the first person, never in the third" (70–71). Plato refers to such ecstatic experiences as divine madness:

The greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven-sent. It was when they were mad that the prophetess at Delphi and the priestess at Dodona achieved so much for which both states and individuals in Greece are thankful; when sane they did little or nothing. (*Phaedrus* 244)

We may not know precisely which of the Greek religions discussed contributed the most to the Pagan Model of ecstatic tongues-speaking. Opinions about this matter differ considerably. But the one thing that is certain is that they all contributed something. Also, each of them possessed some features that are characteristic of twentieth century Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism: "their speech being due to spirit possession; their being unable to discern what they said while in a given ecstatic mood; their state being unconscious" (Mills 169). Whereas the frenzied behavior of the devotees of Dionysus resembles that of the tarrying meetings of the old Pentecostal Holy Rollers, the ecstasy experienced by the followers of Apollo compares more favorably to the reserved conduct of the Neo-Pentecostals.

A Warning from Jesus and Paul

“In praying use not vain repetitions, as the Gentiles do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matt. 6:7). Did you catch the point that I have so often missed? “Use not vain repetitions” is not a command to quit praying the same rational words over and over again in a monotonous fashion. The Greek verb translated here is *batalogeo*, which means to utter senseless sounds—*bata, bata, bata, bata*—an onomatopoeic expression of a meaningless sound made by the lips. The Lord is not condemning the pious Pharisees who pray in order to be heard by men; he is warning against the irrational sounds that come from Gentile worshipers.

Have we missed the whole point about tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 because we have overlooked Paul’s own introduction to the section on spiritual gifts? He reminds the Corinthians of their former ecstatic experiences: “When ye were Gentiles ye were led away (*egesthe*) unto those dumb idols, howsoever ye might be led (*apagromenoi*)” (1 Cor. 12:2). The latter Greek verb implies that they had been possessed by the gods; thus, led away “under external control.” This is a direct reference to pagan forms of ecstasy. Thus, as Staton observes, “To be swept away by an apparent supernatural pull does not necessarily indicate a Christian source” (76). “In fact,” writes Frank Pack, “being seized in such a frenzy is the very opposite of being possessed of spiritual gifts” (89).

Since there are many false prophets in the world, we are commanded not to “believe every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1–2). A person who is possessed by an idol god and, therefore, not in control of what he says might exclaim, “Jesus is anathema!” (1 Cor. 12:3) But a person who speaks by the Holy Spirit will always be in control and confess that “Jesus is Lord,” for Paul affirms that “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32).

In the light of these warnings against pagan ecstasy, it should be clear that the approved tongues of 1 Corinthians 14 conform to the Pentecostal Model. They are intelligible foreign languages which should be spoken only when someone is present who understands what is being said. As a “sign” for unbelievers (v. 22) to attest to divine revelation, tongues serve a useful function. But prophecy is designed for communicating God’s word to believers (v. 22). Paul is trying to correct those who are abusing their gift of tongues. Their failure to give up infantile actions (v. 20), to edify the church (v. 4), to utter “speech easy to be understood” (v. 9), to speak one at a time (v. 27), to interpret (v. 5, 13) or else to use interpreters (vv. 27–28), To exercise self-control (v. 32), to muzzle the ecstatic behavior of the women (v. 33), and to acknowledge the apostolic authority of the word (v. 37) is to give the appearance of pagan ecstasy. Their actions are causing them to sound like the clanging cymbals used by the worshipers of Dionysus and Cybele (1 Cor. 13:1).

Such irrational and irresponsible practices may even cause unbelievers to say that they are “mad” (v. 23)—the state produced by pagan ecstasy. Thus, the Corinthian tongues were intelligent human languages, not irrational fragments of speech produced by a state of ecstasy. **Paul’s words provide no support for the practice of modern charismatics.** Again, let me underscore the fact that God’s people have no right to engage in pagan practices or to act in such a way as to be accused of being “mad.”

A Final Word About Modern Tongues-Speaking

The charismatics freely use expressions like “ecstatic trance,” “constrained by an irresistible power,” “rapture,” and “passivity” in their descriptions of tongues-speaking (Brumback 127–130). Furthermore, they insist that a person is able to prepare himself for such a state of mind and even to initiate the experience itself. Arnold Bittlinger tells those who desire to speak in tongues:

Speaking in tongues is a venture of faith. You lay aside any language which you have ever learned, then lift up your voice and speak out. The ‘risk’ is that you will say nothing more than bla-bla-bla. But when you take this step of simple faith, you discover that God indeed keeps His side of the bargain, and begins to shape the sound which you continue to give Him into a language of prayer and praise. (Christenson 127)

To be sure, the Pentecostals suggest many alternative utterances to replace “bla-bla-bla.” Using the illustration of an open bottle sinking to the bottom of the ocean to describe Holy Spirit baptism, John Osteen writes, “They may start going, ‘Blub, blub, blub.’ Don’t be afraid of the ‘Blub, blub, blub.’ That is just your stammering. It is in the stammering whereby we give our voices over to a flowing language” (29). And Maxwell Whyte suggests repeating the word “blood” (of Jesus) in order to drive out the Devil and bring about a sudden immersion into the Holy Spirit. But he warns, “Some seekers will dislike the pleading of the Blood and consider it foolish or repulsive, but as they are encouraged, they may even find it very difficult, if not impossible, to repeat the word ‘blood’ ” (32). **He proposes, therefore, that such persons be delivered through “the prayer of faith in exorcism ... to make them ready and open for the infilling of the Spirit of God”** (32).

Some Pentecostal churches have even published manuals on how to speak in tongues. Here is an example from one such handbook distributed by the Rainbow Revival Church in Los Angeles, California (Clark 54–55):

We suggest these words of praise to use while seeking the baptism. To try to say words of praise too perfectly hinders the Holy Ghost from speaking in His heavenly languages thru you. SAY THE WORDS OUT LOUD.

As you praise God, do NOT try to stop stammering. In fact, the more you get the words of praise mixed up, the easier it is for the Holy Ghost to take control of your tongue and speak in unknown tongues through you. Isaiah 28:11: "For with stammering lips and another tongue will I speak to this people."

Say the words of praise in a paragraph below over and over very rapidly for 2 or 3 min., then go to the next paragraph, repeating the words of praise in each paragraph about the same length of time. After you have repeated the words in all of the paragraphs, you may start at the beginning, and use these words of praise over and over.

1. GLORY TO GOD, HALLELUJAH GLORY TO GOD, HALLELUJAH GLORY TO GOD
2. PRAISE PRECIOUS JESUS, PRINCE OF PEACE, PRAISE PRECIOUS JESUS
3. I LOVE YOU JESUS, I LOVE YOU JESUS, I LOVE YOU JESUS, I LOVE YOU
4. JESUS SAVIOUR SAVE SINFUL SOULS, SANCTIFY SAINTS TO SERVE THEE
5. PRAISE GOD THE FATHER, GOD THE SON AND GOD THE HOLY GHOST
6. I BESEECH BLESSED BAPTIZER BESTOW BOUNTIFUL BAPTISMAL BLESSINGS
7. GLORY TO JESUS, GLORY TO JESUS, GLORY TO JESUS, GLORY TO JESUS
8. WHILE WHOLEHEARTEDLY WORSHIPPING, WILLINGLY WAITING, JESUS
BAPTIZE ME WITH THE HOLY GHOST, WHILE WHOLEHEARTED WORSHIPPING
9. GLORY TO GOD, GRACIOUS GENEROUS GIVER OF GOOD GIFTS, GLORY TO GOD

No wonder sociologist Nicholas Spanos and a team of researchers at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, concluded from case studies of those who claimed to be speaking in tongues that "speaking in tongues can be taught by one religious person to another and isn't always evidence of holy presence" (Meer 16).

Kenneth Hagan, who practices the laying on of hands to induce the Spirit's gift of tongues - warns tongues-speakers about confusing the seekers:

Don't crowd around candidates who are seeking the Holy Ghost, everyone trying to give instructions at once and getting them confused. Let one person instruct them, let one person tell them how to yield to the Spirit, and if you are standing around, do one of two things. If you are going to pray out loud, pray in tongues. If you are not going to pray out loud, pray to yourself quietly. If you are praying in English, that person can hear what you are saying. They will get their mind on you, and many times will not yield to God listening to what people around them are saying. (53)

I cannot possibly imagine the Apostle Peter warning the other apostles not to speak in Hebrew or Aramaic lest they confuse one another and, as a result, some of them not get the Holy Spirit. Even the thought of such a situation existing at Pentecost is absurd.

Obviously, with so many opinions about how to prepare oneself to speak in tongues, doubts are bound to arise in the seeker's mind. Christenson lists two such "testings." "The first test," he says, "usually comes almost at once: It is the temptation to think, 'I am just making this up' " (131). The second test comes "after one has exercised the gift for a time—perhaps weeks or months" (131). It is described as follows:

The initial joy and enthusiasm which one had in the use of the gift begins to fade. You can still speak in tongues as fluently as ever, but it doesn't seem to be "doing" anything for you. It's just a hollow shell, with no inner content. The temptation is to let the gift fall into disuse. This is a temptation which one must resolutely resist. (131)

Again, let me affirm, I cannot possibly picture the Apostle Peter getting rusty with his tongue simply because he no longer got anything out of the experience. Of course, I can easily imagine a pagan ecstatic tongues-speaker having the kind of letdown experienced by charismatics. Clearly, then, charismatic tongues-speaking fits the Pagan Model.

Conclusion

Therefore, I conclude that charismatic tongues-speaking clearly fits the Pagan Model. To call what goes on in the movement a renewal of the Pentecostal experience of Acts 2 is to fly in the face of Biblical and historical evidence.

Brethren, let us put all the fervor into our worship that God expects. But in our attempt to restore New Testament worship, we must follow the Pentecostal Model and not fall prey to pagan practices in the process.¹

¹ Curry, M. (1987). [Tongues—Pentecostal or Pagan?](#) In M. D. Curry (Ed.), *Praise, Prayer and Providence* (pp. 190–206). Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College Bookstore.