

# The Gift of Tongues in the Post Apostolic Church (A.D. 100-400)

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It is very clear in Paul's teaching that tongues are to cease (1 Cor. 13:8), but, of course, the big problem is when this is to occur. This study is not intended to discuss the possible answers to this question, but rather it is to examine the evidence of the church fathers from A.D. 100 to 400 to determine if tongues were still practiced as they were in the times of the apostles. If the gift of tongues did not cease completely in the first century, then there should be evidence of this continuation. If the gift is as important as many teach, then the leaders of the Post Apostolic Age should have stressed this and commended its practice highly. The evidence, however, does not indicate that tongues had a significant place in the church from A.D. 100 to 400.

## **The Testimony of the Apostolic Fathers**

While there is clear evidence from Scripture that the gift of tongues was in operation during the time of the apostles, it is significant that the gift is nowhere alluded to, hinted at, or found in the Apostolic Fathers. It might be objected that this is simply an argument from silence and has as much support for the continuance of the gift as for the cessation of the gift. However, the importance of this silence takes on added weight when viewed in the light of certain facts.

**First**, some of the Apostolic Fathers wrote from and to churches where the gift had been practiced during the time of the apostles. The most outstanding case of this is Clement of Rome and his epistle to the church at Corinth. If there was any early church where tongues were practiced, it was here. This was evidently one of the major problems that Paul had to contend with in his letter to them; yet Clement of Rome never mentions the gift, even when speaking of their spiritual heritage. The same problem of disobedience to authority was present, but that of tongues had evidently been solved by their ceasing. Ignatius wrote to the church of Ephesus where the first Christians spoke in tongues, but he, too, has nothing to say regarding the gift.

**Second**, the wide geographical coverage of the Apostolic Fathers makes their silence significant. Clement wrote from Rome to Corinth; Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, wrote to those at Philippi; Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Smyrna, Philadelphia; the Epistle of Barnabas

was probably written from Alexandria; The Shepherd of Hermas may have been written from Rome; Papias was from Hierapolis in Phrygia; the Didache may have been written from Egypt or possibly from Syria or Palestine; and the Epistle to Diognetus was probably written from Alexandria. This covers practically every significant area of the Roman Empire, and certainly if the gift of tongues were widespread and in abundance, it would surely have been alluded to or mentioned in some way.

**Third**, the doctrinal character of the Apostolic Fathers makes their silence regarding tongues significant. Though they were not written as textbooks on theology, their writings cover practically every major doctrine taught in the New Testament. Everything from theology proper to eschatology is mentioned, yet there is no evidence for any discussion of tongues.

**Fourth**, the purpose of many of the writings makes the omission of tongues significant. For example, the purpose of The Epistle to Diognetus was to answer the questions of Diognetus regarding Christianity. The writer proceeds by showing the folly of idolatry (1-2), the inadequacy of Judaism (3-4), and the superiority of Christianity (5-12). This would have been an excellent opportunity to present the gift of tongues as a proof for the supernatural character of Christianity. As previously mentioned, Clement of Rome wrote to correct spiritual errors at Corinth, but he does not speak at all about tongues. Irenaeus said regarding Polycarp's letter to the Philippians that those who "choose to do so, and are anxious about their salvation, can learn the character of his faith, and the preaching of the truth." However, Polycarp nowhere indicates that tongues are a part of the normal character of Christianity; in fact, he does not even touch on the subject of tongues.

From these observations, it is clear that the silence of the Apostolic Fathers cannot be simply dismissed as being of no consequence.

### **The Testimony of Justin Martyr**

Justin Martyr, who was born around A.D. 100 and was martyred somewhere between A.D. 163 and 167, traveled widely in the Roman Empire and should have come in contact with the phenomena of speaking in tongues. He was born in Samaria, converted in Ephesus, and traveled over the empire as a Christian teacher. In spite of this extensive traveling and teaching, Justin has nothing to say regarding the gift of tongues.

There is, however, one section in his work Dialogue with Trypho which might give rise to the idea that Justin knew of tongues. In arguing that the prophetic gifts of the Jews are now transferred to Christians, he says: "For the prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time. And hence you ought to understand that [the gifts] formerly among your nation have been transferred to us." However, Jackson remarks that "it is not certain that speaking with tongues is here intended." There are a number of things which support this and make it almost certain that Justin did not have the gift of tongues in mind. First, Justin states that the gifts he is speaking of were formerly among the people of Israel. This certainly would not apply to this gift for it is only used in connection with the church.

Second, when Justin speaks of gifts he mentions seven, but the gift of tongues is not included. In the light of these facts it is very evident that Justin did not have the gift of tongues in mind.

Just as the silence of the Apostolic Fathers was significant, so the silence of Justin Martyr is important, especially in the light of certain facts. The fact that Justin traveled widely and yet makes no reference to tongues would show that either he had never encountered the phenomena or that he was unimpressed by the gift if he did. Another fact is that though he was a teacher of the Christian faith, his silence that the gift was not an integral or important part of Christian doctrine is significant. If the gift were prominent, why did a man of his stature fail to give any notice to it? Still another fact lending weight to Justin's silence is the nature of his writings. In his Dialogue with Trypho, he shows the superiority of Christianity over Judaism and it would have been an excellent opportunity to point to the gift of tongues as proof of his thesis. When he writes his Hortatory Address to the Greeks, he states explicitly that he is going to examine accurately Christianity and heathen religion. By comparing the teachings of the two he states he will demonstrate that Christianity is the true religion. One of the strongest things he could have used would have been the gift of tongues, but he did not even mention them.

### **The Testimony of Irenaeus**

The witness of Irenaeus is very important for his statement regarding tongues has been pointed to as evidence of the existence of the gift in the centuries after the Apostles. Irenaeus says "we hear many brethren in the Church...who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages."

Before considering this statement more closely, the background of Irenaeus should be examined. Though very little is known of Irenaeus' early life, the few scraps of information that are available are very vital. As a boy growing up in Smyrna he heard Polycarp and was greatly influenced by him. Some time around A.D. 177 Irenaeus traveled from Asia Minor to Lyons in Gaul where he became a presbyter under Pothinus who was also trained by Polycarp. During this time he witnessed the severe persecution at Lyons and saw his faithful friend, Pothinus, brutally murdered. While still a presbyter, he was sent to Rome with a letter for the bishop, Eleutherus. This was a letter written by a group of Montanists to try to persuade Eleutherus to have a kind attitude toward them. It was after the death of Pothinus that Irenaeus became bishop of Lyons where he served until he, too, died a martyr's death.

In connection with the present study, two things in the background of Irenaeus should be observed. First, he came from Asia Minor and then ministered in Lyons. It is important to realize that it was in Asia Minor and Syria that there were many unhealthy influences upon Christianity, and particularly the influence of Montanus and his perverted pneumatology. This association with the Montanist element did not cease when Irenaeus arrived in Lyons, for there was a close connection between the churches of Lyons and those of Asia Minor. In addition to Pothinus and Irenaeus from Asia Minor, also Alexander from Phrygia and Attalus from Pergamon were among those residing in Lyons. With this close relation it is only natural that

there were spiritual and doctrinal connections, good as well as bad, and Montanism was one of the bad elements in Lyons. It is in this light that Irenaeus' statement regarding tongues should be viewed. From his background he had evidently heard the spiritual excesses of those who were influenced by Montanus.

The second thing to observe about the background of Irenaeus is that he was influenced by Polycarp. Because of this close association, it would be normal to him to have derived much of his knowledge of Christian doctrine from the aged bishop of Smyrna. It is obvious that tongues did not play a part in Polycarp's writings, and even more significant that they did not occupy a large part of Irenaeus' theology. The point is, if the gift were of great importance, both the teacher and his pupil should have stressed it. They did not. With these things in mind it is now possible to examine Irenaeus' statement regarding tongues. First, observe that Irenaeus does not say he spoke in tongues. Second, he evidently does not classify those close to him as having the gift, for he uses the plural "we hear." Coxe points out that the old Latin uses the perfect *audivimus*, "we have heard." Third, because of Irenaeus' association with the Montanists, Robertson is right in saying, "His rather vague statement may rest on some report as to the Montanists of Asia Minor..." From these things it must be concluded that Irenaeus meant that he and those around him had at some past time heard of things like those heard in Montanists circles. Regarding the whole of Irenaeus' works it could be said that certainly the main thrust and emphasis of his theology was not on the gift of tongues.

### **The Testimony of Tertullian**

Tertullian, the celebrated theologian of North Africa, was another who came under the influence of Montanus. Although he traveled widely and was an out-standing scholar, his references to the gift of tongues are meager and betray his connection with Montanism. In trying to show that the soul has a kind of corporeality, he describes the soul's attributes, one of which is the ability to possess spiritual gifts. To illustrate the point, he cites an example of a Montanist woman who says she has conversed with angels and has had other ecstatic experiences. He does not actually mention the gift of tongues here, but he does describe her as having "gifts of revelation, which she experiences in the Spirit by ecstatic vision...." If this is a witness to the activity of the gift, it is a weak witness and certainly is far from the normal Christian experience of that day.

Tertullian makes a specific reference to the gift of tongues in his work *Against Marcion*. Even here he does not actually say anything about tongues in his time. He is taking Paul's epistles and pointing out the apologetic value found in each letter. He takes them epistle by epistle and chapter by chapter. When he comes to the spiritual gifts as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14, he acknowledges that all do not have the same gifts, but that the Spirit has given different gifts to different men. He merely discusses what Paul says about the gifts and makes no reference to the use of the gift in his time. He calls on Marcion to duplicate these gifts as exhibited by the apostles, but does not say that he has seen or knows of any one who exercises the gift.

### **The Testimony of Montanus**

About the only clear statement regarding the manifestation of tongues is found in Eusebius' description of the activity of Montanus. He writes: "So that he was carried away in spirit, and was wrought up into a certain kind of frenzy and irregular ecstasy, raving, and speaking, and uttering strange things and proclaiming what was contrary to the institutions that had prevailed in the church..." Although the term tongues is not expressly used, it is very obvious, as Lietzmann remarks, that in the experience Montanus "showed all the manifestations of glossalalia."

The significance of the testimony of Montanus is seen in the following observations. First, he was considered a heretic. He did not conform to the Scriptures and even those around him acknowledged this. Second, his particular heresy was in the realm of Pneumatology and his emphasis on the chrismata. Yet even with all this emphasis, the Montanist activity was considered to fall far short of the gifts as exercised by the apostles. Third, Lietzmann points out that at first this phenomena of ecstasy and glossalalia did not spread rapidly or widely. This would seem to indicate that their extremes were not a part of usual Christian experience. If this had been a common practice, then it would have been more natural for many to accept this as being a part of the normal Christian life.

### **The Testimony of Origen**

While all of Origen's theology may not be orthodox, he is recognized by all as being one of the ablest scholars of his day. He not only was acquainted with affairs of his day through extensive reading, but he also traveled widely himself and had students from all over the world attending his classes. If the gift were widespread or even practiced at all, certainly Origen should have known something about it and would have mentioned it somewhere in his voluminous writings. Yet he has no clear statement regarding the gift and his testimony indicates that the extraordinary gifts were gone.

It is in his answer to Celsus that Origen has something to say about spiritual gifts. Celsus made the charge that the Old Testament prophets are like certain ones in Phoenicia and Palestine who go through foolish motions and gestures, then say they have a prophecy. He is quoted by Origen as saying: "To these promises are 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; but they give occasion to every fool or impostor to apply them to suit his own purposes." Origen's answer to such a charge is quite pertinent to this discussion. He says that though the Holy Spirit gave signs and outward demonstrations of His presence at the beginning of Christ's ministry and after His ascension, these things have diminished and are no longer widespread. Furthermore he says Celsus is speaking falsely when describing what he had heard: "For no prophet bearing any resemblance to the ancient prophets have appeared in the time of Celsus." What Origen is saying is that no longer are there any of these gifts in operation! Origen does not say the gift of tongues is flourishing at his time, but rather that such gifts have diminished!

### **The Testimony of Chrysostom**

The last of the Church Fathers to be considered is the able exegete and outstanding preacher, Chrysostom. After studying and ministering around the city of Antioch he became the patriarch of Constantinople. As the religious leader in the great city of Constantinople, he surely was in contact with Christians and churches from all over the empire. As he approaches his message on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians, he confesses that the "whole place is very obscure," and goes on to add: "but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur, but now no longer take place." Here is a clear statement by a well-versed exegete and religious leader of the fourth century stating that tongues are no longer practiced in his day. Far from being the normal occurrence in Christian circles, the gift of tongues is rather unknown! The stature and position of Chrysostom make his testimony extremely important. Evidently, at least by this time, the gift of tongues had died out.

### **The Testimony of the Common Christians**

Someone might object that those considered are the theologians and leader of the church and do not reflect the character of common Christianity. Though it would be unthinkable for the leaders of the church to overlook such a phenomena as tongues, it is acknowledged that some of the trained apologists might not reflect a true picture of common Christianity. However, Carpenter points out that it is the Apostolic Fathers who reflect popular Christianity of the second and third centuries. As previously noted, the Apostolic Fathers make no reference at all to the gift. Even the magic formulae used by some of the early Christians and preserved on papyri do not form a parallel to the gift of tongues in spite of the fact some of the words are unintelligible.

### **Conclusion**

After examining the testimony of the early Christian leaders whose ministry represents practically every area of the Roman Empire from approximately A.D. 100 to 400, it appears that the miraculous gifts of the first century died out and were no longer needed to establish Christianity. Furthermore, it is very evident that even if the gift were in existence, in spite of all the testimony to the contrary, it was neither widespread nor the normal Christian experience. The only clear reference to anything resembling the phenomena is connected with the heretic Montanus and those influenced by his erroneous views of the Spirit. All of the evidence points to the truth of Paul's prophecy when he says "tongues shall cease" (1 Cor. 13:8).

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