

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives

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STUDIES IN PENTECOSTAL
AND CHARISMATIC ISSUES



**PATERNOSTER
PRESS**

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First published in 2003 by Paternoster Press

09 08 07 06 05 04 03 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Paternoster Press is an imprint of Authentic Media
PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK
and

PO Box 1047, Waynesboro, GA 30830-2047, USA
www.paternoster-publishing.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1-84227-200-4

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Cover design by FourNineZero
Typeset by Waverley Typesetters, Galashiel

Glossolalia and Socialization¹

1. Introduction

The Pentecostal and charismatic movements are now very influential globally. Yet it is only recently that studies have been undertaken which combine different approaches to them, such as sociology and theology together. In this chapter material is presented from the case study of Aigburth Community Church (ACC) and this is subsequently supported and developed by the survey data. The focus of the study is the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, otherwise known as glossolalia. For charismatics, the gift of tongues is understood to be a language of worship and prayer, and as such a means of communication to God. Classical Pentecostals understood it to be the definitive sign of an overwhelming experience of the Holy Spirit, called baptism in the Spirit. Initially those involved in traditional denominations also understood it in this way. However, with the influence of the Third Wave movement, focused around the ministry of John Wimber and the Vineyard denomination, this specific emphasis has waned. The New Church movement, formerly called the House Church movement, combines a variety of Pentecostal and charismatic strands together, but it also seeks to develop its own unique approach.² The church in this study, as described in earlier chapters, is to be located within this New Church movement.

For research purposes, I use the working definition of charismatic glossolalia proposed by V. S. Poythress. That is, glossolalia is a form of free vocalization:

Free vocalization (glossolalia) occurs when (1) a human being produces a connected sequence of speech sounds, (2) he cannot identify the

sound-sequence as belonging to any natural language that he already knows how to speak, (3) he cannot identify and give the meaning of words or morphemes (minimal lexical units), (4) in the case of utterances of more than a few syllables, he typically cannot repeat the same sound-sequence on demand, (5) a naive listener might suppose that it was an unknown language.³

Poythress uses the term *T-speech* (tongues) to refer to Christian free vocalization within the context of worship and prayer.

This chapter seeks to review the case study and survey material concerning the theological praxis of glossolalia by means of those setting variables which suggest that glossolalia is acquired by means of socialization. By socialization is meant the process by which a person is integrated into a culture or subculture. In socialization the person learns the meanings of the subculture, identifies with them and is shaped by them. As Peter Berger says, 'He draws them into himself and makes them *his* meanings. He becomes not only one who possesses these meanings, but one who represents and expresses them.'⁴ The most important discussion of this idea is by William J. Samarin.⁵ He combines his insights as both a linguist and anthropologist, that is, in sociolinguistic terms, to argue that glossolalia is more properly understood as a learned experience. The social context at the very least provides certain clues which enable the individual to take a 'jump into the dark' and speak in tongues.⁶

Samarin's sources include responses to a questionnaire and a transcription of a tape recording of a Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship meeting, where people were invited to receive the baptism in the Spirit. There were 84 questionnaire responses from different groups in Canada, Germany, England, Holland and the USA. They were mostly from middle-class Protestant members of the Charismatic Movement rather than established Pentecostal groups. Samarin investigated the acquisition of glossolalia by means of questions concerning: the desire to speak in tongues, friends and family who spoke in tongues, encouragement or exhortation, instruction or guidance about what might occur, difficulties encountered, first experience and expectations and the improvement of one's ability to speak in tongues as time passed.

Samarin argues that, strictly speaking, glossolalia cannot be learned in the sense that one would learn a normal human language. This is because each tongue speech is produced more or less *de novo*. However, in another sense glossolalia is learned because it is associated with becoming a member of a social group. The main requirement for someone to speak in tongues is a desire to do so as part of a search for a new or better religious experience. Often the instruction given to those seeking baptism in the Spirit is minimal concerning tongues. It may contain some instruction to submit oneself to God and to relax. This can be supplemented in a number of ways. For instance, a person may be advised: (1) to speak whatever comes to mind; or (2) to 'make sounds' of any kind, with allusions often made to childlike speech; or (3) to imitate the utterances of others as they speak in tongues; or (4) to repeat a brief meaningless utterance (which has already come to mind) in the hope that fluent productive glossolalia will follow; or (5) to repeat a meaningful word or phrase, for example 'El Shaddai' or 'Praise Jesus', as a means of speaking in tongues. Such instruction is often accompanied by an expectant atmosphere, constructed by the use of silence, hushed voices, the rhetoric of the preacher and fostered by the 'laying on of hands'.⁷ However, Samarin qualifies these comments by saying that the social setting in which the acquisition of glossolalia occurs appears to be so varied as to make it irrelevant.⁸ But the question is whether there is some underlying social influence which transcends local variations?

According to Samarin, the language learning instruction is to be summarized by saying that the respondents to his questionnaire were given no clear model as to how to speak in tongues, and that many of them had not heard glossolalia for long enough to conceive their own model of it. They did not know the phonological elements required to produce glossolalia or how to group these elements together in speech. All that they understood was that whatever they said would be 'real words from a real language unknown to themselves'.⁹ In addition, Samarin argues that there will always be people for whom this minimal instruction does not apply. These people find themselves speaking in tongues without intending to do so, privately, and without any knowledge of the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions. However, such people are expected to be rare in number.

For Samarin, the instruction that is given in meetings is of little linguistic importance. Someone who has been exposed to glossolalia, however, can retain enough information so that he or she is able to use the same sound, intonation and paralinguistic devices. He suggests that it is more likely that glossolalic patterns be passed on within the circle of those who already speak in tongues. Therefore, glossolalic control improves, and people learn to use it in different ways.¹⁰

In summary, Samarin argues that the desire for deeper spiritual experience when linked to the setting variables located in the various contexts predisposes individuals to speak in tongues. The implicit assumptions within the Charismatic Movement create contexts in which the seeker is able to take a 'jump into the dark' and begin speaking in tongues.

2. Qualitative Method

As discussed in chapter 5, participant observation was carried out over a period of seven months in which I visited Sunday worship on eight occasions.¹¹ Documents relating to the church life were analysed, and included Sunday newsletters, foundation documents, which were written at the church's inception, the Alpha course material used by the church,¹² and the book by Nicky Gumbel.¹³ Semi-structured interviews were conducted on nine occasions with a total of thirteen people taking part. The interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed.¹⁴ Some of the interview questions targeted the relevant areas of: church background and Christian experience, initial and current experience of glossolalia, frequency of use, contexts and sources of understanding or interpretation. Data analysis was conducted with the assistance of a free-form text retrieval system.¹⁵

3. Qualitative Data

All of those interviewed had wished to receive spiritual gifting from God when they initially found themselves speaking in tongues. There were five who specifically emphasized the fact that they had

been seeking the gift (Steven, Rebecca, Ruth, Emily and Rachel), although the circumstances varied. For Steven in particular, the biblical injunction of 1 Corinthians 14:1, that one should 'eagerly desire spiritual gifts', was inspirational. However, *all* were influenced by some of the biblical teaching on the matter of spiritual gifts and glossolalia as it is mediated through the contemporary Charismatic Movement.

Most interviewees were able to confirm that they had been encouraged to speak in tongues by someone they knew or had met. There were five who linked it to their experience of baptism in the Spirit (Steven, Kate, Robert, Philip and Adam). One associated an initial experience of glossolalia with her water baptism (Rachel). Another person received the gift while seeking it privately at home (Rebecca). There were three others who received explicit instructions while seeking to speak in tongues.

First, Jane told the story of how she was prayed over by a Baptist minister friend and his wife. She was told to say whatever came to mind at a later time, when she was expected to pray at home. In other words, she was to verbalize what sounds came into mind. This she was able to do and remembers consciously deciding to say the 'words' she had in her mind.

Second, Ruth had also been prayed for in order to receive the gift. The advice she received, after having had a failed attempt two years previously, was to be 'practical'. She should not expect tongues to suddenly flow, she had to speak aloud any syllables which came to mind. This she was able to do. Subsequently, some time later, she attended a charismatic camp seminar on the subject of praying for a 'new' tongue. This she received and discovered it to be better than the 'old' one, to which she never returned.

Third, Emily had been seeking the gift for some time, but to no avail. She had been helping at a children's camp where the children had been speaking in tongues. She was frustrated by her own inability and sought counsel. She was advised that there was nothing that anyone else could do, that she had to do it herself. She was disappointed at the time but later 'decided' to do it. She said one 'word' and kept repeating that 'word' over and over again. She felt that it was like a baby language one had to repeat and practise. Subsequently more 'words' were added until she became fluent.

All the informants, except Julie, had experienced other forms of charismatic Christianity before coming to the ACC. In most cases it appears that the wider charismatic scene has more influence than their present church. Here tongues are rarely used in public. Therefore the socialization of people into the acceptance of glossolalia occurs largely from previous church experience or wider charismatic contact.

Finally, most of the interviewees felt that they had developed their glossolalia through some form of practice. More 'words' came as existing 'words' were used. Thus the speech became more fluent as longer time periods were spent using it. More purpose was developed and different uses discovered (for example, worship, intercession and spiritual warfare). Only two people felt that their glossolalia had declined in recent times. Philip felt that his use of tongues had declined through lack of practice, thus the habit had changed, while Adam believed speaking in tongues was now drier and less exciting than it had been previously. He preferred the use of silence when praying, but noticed that during a time of crisis he returned to using tongues. Finally, Basil had declared himself a non-tongues speaker. He had at one point received one 'word' in his mind but felt unable to proceed. He dismissed his inability to speak in tongues as due to being a linguist and a Latin teacher! He has nevertheless felt edified by the tongues speech of others.

4. Reflections on Qualitative Data

It is inevitable that the person's desire to speak in tongues is informed by the charismatic tradition he or she has encountered. The gift of tongues is legitimized by reference to the Bible, which informs the basic perceptions of reality through which the phenomenon is socialized. The variety of social contexts in which people learn and practise glossolalia indicates, as Samarín suggests, that the social setting is highly varied and perhaps not as stereotyped as might be thought in terms of the acquisition of glossolalia. In the ACC the public use of tongues is infrequent and largely limited to singing in tongues. This means that informants utilize the setting variables of the wider Charismatic Movement to support and reinforce their belief and practice. This is confirmed by the fact that only one

informant (Julie) encountered tongues initially at ACC, where it was associated for her with becoming a Christian and joining a social group. Socialization occurred here, but more significantly at the Good News Crusade Camp and other occasions where the social expectation to practise glossolalia was considerably higher. It is also clear that those whose practice of glossolalia had decreased were people who had less contact, and therefore less continued socialization, with the wider Charismatic Movement than others interviewed (Philip and Adam).¹⁶

Although the social contexts vary immensely there appears to be a socialization process in operation. It may be expressed in weaker terms at one end of the spectrum, for example, being 'encouraged' to speak in tongues; or by simply picking up the clues from the social context. Alternatively, it can be expressed in more explicit terms at the other end of the spectrum, where the instructions given to seekers are clearly expressed. Both extremes are located within the data from the case study. The development of tongues speech recorded in the data also coheres with what Samarin describes. People develop their ability to speak in tongues not in isolation but within a Christian community, that is, within continued socialization. Therefore it is not surprising that individuals will consciously or unconsciously adopt certain language styles and perceptions which reflect their particular group, and in some cases other groups as well. However, this socialization interpretation simply draws out the largely implicit (but sometimes explicit) influences at work throughout the Charismatic Movement. Further research is required to elucidate the nature of the glossolalic experience for the minority who do not fit into this category, that is, those people who suddenly find themselves speaking in tongues without having any charismatic socialization whatsoever.

5. Quantitative Method

The questionnaire used for the survey contained a number of items that can be used to test the theory of socialization in relation to glossolalia. The following questions are relevant to our discussion.

- Do you speak in tongues?

The answer options were: (1) nearly every day, (2) at least once a week, (3) at least once a month, (4) occasionally, (5) used to, but not now, (6) never.

- Have you been baptized in the Holy Spirit?

The answer options were: (1) yes, (2) no, (3) don't know.

- If yes, did you speak in tongues at the same time?

The answer options were: (1) yes, (2) no.

- Do you associate speaking in tongues with joining the Charismatic Movement?

The answer options were: (1) yes, (2) no, (3) don't know.

- Does your speaking in tongues sound similar to the speaking in tongues of the person who first led you into this experience?

The answer options were, on a Likert scale: 1 = extremely little, 7 = extremely much.

- What is the purpose of speaking in tongues?

The answer options were: (1) prayer, (2) prophecy, (3) worship, (4) spiritual battle. The answers were measured according to the Likert scale: 1 = extremely little, 7 = extremely much.

- How much have the following helped you to understand speaking in tongues?

The categories were: (1) famous preachers (P), (2) church leaders (L), (3) friends (F), (4) conferences (C), (5) books (B), (6) magazines (M), (7) audio tapes (AT), (8) video tapes (VT), (9) personal Bible study (PBS). The answers were measured according to the Likert scale: 1 = extremely little, 7 = extremely much. This item is a significant measure of charismatic socialization because when tested together as a nine-item scale of measurement it achieved a Cronbach alpha reliability score of .8130. However, for our purposes, which benefit from seeing how the individual items work, I shall focus on its components.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated in order to guide the research process.

1. Speaking in tongues is part of the socialization process of joining the Pentecostal and/or Charismatic Movement.
2. A person's tongues speech is influenced by the tongues speech of the person who prayed for them to be led into the experience.
3. Socialization factors influence the frequency of speaking in tongues.
4. Socialization factors influence the purpose of speaking in tongues.

6. Results

Table 10.1: Frequency Count

(1) Speaking in tongues (%)	
Never	15.5
Used to, but not now	0.6
Occasionally	14.8
At least once a month	4.7
At least once a week	18.5
Nearly every day	44.7
Not applicable	1.1
Total	100.0
(2) Baptized in the Spirit (%)	
No	3.9
Don't know	4.7
Yes	90.2
Not applicable	0.8
Total	100.0

(3) Speak in tongues at baptism in the Spirit (%)	
No	58.5
Yes	32.9
Not applicable	8.7
Total	100.0
(4) Associated with joining the Charismatic Movement (%)	
No	62.2
Don't know	9.0
Yes	24.3
Not applicable	4.4
Total	100.0
(5) Speech sounds like the person's speech who led me (%)	
Extremely little	49.6
Very little	5.7
Little	3.5
Neutral	2.7
Much	1.3
Very much	0.8
Extremely much	1.1
Not applicable	35.4
Total	100.0

Table 10.1 shows that the majority of respondents speak in tongues regularly and that they have been baptized in the Spirit (90.2%). The majority did not, however, speak in tongues at their baptism in the Spirit (58.5%), nor do they associate speaking in tongues with joining the Charismatic Movement (62.2%). Nor do they regard their tongues speech as sounding like the speech of the person who led them into that experience. The majority of those answering this question (49.6%) thought that the influence was extremely little.

Table 10.2: Correlation (Pearson's *r*) socialization factors and the frequency of tongues speech

	<i>P</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>VT</i>	<i>PBS</i>
Frequency	.146**	.091*	NS	.132**	.134**	.100*	.107*	.128**	.256**
** = significant at the .01 level									
* = significant at the .05 level									

Table 10.2 shows that the frequency of speaking in tongues is influenced by the socialization factors, with the exception of friends. The most influential factor is personal Bible study.

Table 10.3: Correlation (Pearson's *r*) socialization factors and purpose of tongues speech

Purpose of tongues	<i>P</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>AT</i>	<i>VT</i>	<i>PBS</i>
Prayer	.243**	.242**	.205**	.198**	.274**	.140**	.222**	.139**	.395**
Prophecy	.243**	.234**	.124*	.221**	.136**	.153**	.228**	.259**	.211**
Worship	.227**	.209**	.133**	.196**	.220**	.122*	.182**	.178**	.340**
Spiritual battle	.204**	.156**	.116*	.196**	.177**	.144**	.193**	.188**	.268**
** = significant at the .01 level									
* = significant at the .05 level									

Table 10.3 shows that all the socialization factors are significantly correlated to the items of the purpose of speaking in tongues for prayer, prophecy, worship and spiritual battle. The most significant correlations are for the factor of personal Bible study in relation to the activities of prayer, worship and spiritual battle.

7. Discussion

Hypothesis 1 is uncorroborated by this data. Although the majority of respondents have experienced baptism in the Spirit they do not regard it as either associated with speaking in tongues or with joining

the Charismatic Movement. This data suggest that approximately a quarter (24.3%) of respondents make such an association. Therefore, the element of socialization which understands speaking in tongues as a boundary marker that people experience in order to belong to a Pentecostal or charismatic group has only limited support.

Hypothesis 2 is uncorroborated by the data, according to which most of those answering the question regarded their tongues speech to be dissimilar to person who prayed for them to receive the gift. The fact that only 64.6% of the respondents answered the question may indicate a certain ambivalence towards the question.

Hypothesis 3 is corroborated with respect to all but one of the socialization factors and the frequency of speaking in tongues generally. The most important influences are personal Bible study, famous preachers, books, conferences and video tapes.

Hypothesis 4 is entirely corroborated. The socialization factors are associated with the purpose of speaking in tongues for prayer, prophecy, worship and spiritual battle. The most significant influence is personal Bible study, especially for prayer, worship and spiritual battle. Prophecy is, however, most influenced by video tapes. Again, the impact of personal Bible study must be noted.

8. Conclusion

In summary, these data suggest that Samaritans overestimates the role that friends and family play with regard to learning to speak in tongues. There may well be encouragement and guidance as to what might occur but this does not correspond with direct imitation in most cases. For some there is a link to the experience of baptism in the Spirit, but this is now a minority experience within the British Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Certainly the socialization factors tested suggest a broad influence of the Charismatic Movement; the most significant influences are personal Bible study and church leadership. This suggests that while literature and media are significant, they play a secondary role compared to church leaders and charismatic and evangelical spirituality, which is rooted in personal Bible study. The significance of personal Bible study should not, however, surprise Pentecostal and charismatic

Christians, whose worldview is informed and shaped by the text of Scripture.

This study seeks to combine both theology and social science in a mutually enlightening manner. However, theology cannot be entirely reduced to social science without serious loss of identity. Rather, the practical theological approach affirms the idea that within the *charismata* grace works in and through human nature, including socialization processes. As Max Turner argues:

even a 'learned behaviour' or a form of utterance initially psychologically induced might (in God's grace, and when directed to him in a doxology of love) *become* a 'supernatural' divine gift (even if not a 'miraculous' one), in the same fashion as a person's natural teaching gifts may become on occasion the spiritual gift of powerful preaching that 'brings all heaven down' to listeners.¹⁷

Therefore theology and social science may both illuminate the contemporary phenomenon of glossolalia in complementary terms. This social science perspective also highlights the limitations of the socialization theory: it can only explain or interpret glossolalia partially (the hypotheses were corroborated only partially).¹⁸ Nevertheless, it identifies the importance of the wider sociological base in relation to which *most*, if not all, acquire and sustain glossolalia. It is in this sense that the perspective of Samarín can be understood to shed light on the social settings in which the prospective tongue speaker takes a 'jump into the dark'. It is theology in dialogue with empirical research (hence empirical theology) which begins to illuminate that darkness, or mystery, and helps practitioners and critics alike understand something of the *significance* of charismatic glossolalic praxis.

9. Methodological Reflection

This study considers the nature of an important sociological theory of socialization by first of all engaging with scholarly literature on the subject. Inductively gathered qualitative data is re-interrogated by means of this theoretical approach. The resulting material is reflected upon in the light of the original theoretical approach.

Some of the questions relevant to this theory are re-examined in the survey questionnaire database before being reflected upon in light of the original theoretical perspective. Recommendations to theological praxis are suggested in the light of this research so that a greater understanding of Pentecostals and charismatics in Britain is gained.

In this example, while the study is guided by theory, qualitative data precedes and prepares the way for quantitative data. However, it is possible for this position to be reversed, in which case qualitative data would offer in-depth descriptions and subtle nuances to the picture offered by the quantitative data. As this study shows, a serious engagement with the actual theological praxis of Pentecostals and charismatics by means of qualitative and quantitative empirical data can equip researchers and church leaders with different types of knowledge upon which to base strategies for renewed theological praxis at local, national and international levels. The study highlights the important socializing role of personal Bible study and the influence of church leadership. Therefore practical strategies could be put in place to enhance and supervise the effectiveness of both roles in relation to socialization in general and the acquisitions and use of glossolalia in particular. Spiritual gifts are given to the church as the community of God to be used within a context of gratitude and love for the sake of the kingdom. The key use of glossolalia is in terms of worship and prayer; and opportunities should be modelled for the sensitive and appropriate use of this gift in church services and small group settings. A recognition of the fact that the Holy Spirit uses socialization processes but is not constrained by them can assist us to understand how grace intertwines with nature.

¹ The qualitative basis for this chapter was published previously as 'The Socialization of Glossolalia' in L. J. Francis (ed.), *Sociology, Theology and the Curriculum* (London: Cassell, 1999) pp. 125-34.

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- ⁶ Samarin, *Tongues of Men and of Angels*, p. 55.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 50-8.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p. 61.
- ⁹ Samarin, 'Glossolalia as Learned Behaviour', p. 62.
- ¹⁰ Samarin, 'Glossolalia as Regressive Speech', p. 87.
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