

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Tongues As a Gift of Unity** Seventh Week of Easter Monday, June 2, 2014 8:15 AM  
**Acts 19:1-8; Jn 16:29-33** (Sts. Marcellinus and Peter, martyrs) (Tower of Babel;  
Glossolalia; Tongues at Pentecost)

**“And when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.”**

There are various stories in Scripture about tongues. Going back to the Book of Genesis there is this very strange story, hardly plausible, about the **Tower of Babel**. According to the story, men were building a tower to reach up to heaven, as if so doing they would actually reach God, as if God was physically in the clouds. That’s the first premise of the story. And, according to the story, this was disturbing to God because, apparently, it must have been possible, **so God confused their tongues so they couldn’t cooperate anymore.**

And this was what is called by scholars **an etiology; that means it’s an explanation of how some phenomenon arose.** The phenomenon it is explaining was the phenomenon of many different languages. How did that happen—because you go back to the idea in Scripture, the Book of Genesis, that is that all human beings came from the same stock; we are all one family. Well, if we are all one family, how come we don’t all speak one language? That’s the question, answered with, oh, well, the Tower of Babel—that’s how it happened. Well, of course it’s implausible. **We know differently today about how languages arose. But the point is this idea of tongues and the confusion of tongues. It’s part of the story as the Bible tells it.**

So now when it comes to the **Holy Spirit**, we have, again, **tongues; but now with a different emphasis.** These men spoke in tongues. What does that mean? It’s hard to say. There are different phenomena described. **Glossolalia** is one of them, which means the **making of sounds without actually any words.** Now Pentecostals and charismatics often

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have this gift of glossolalia, and it indicates, again, **the unity of the Spirit, so just the opposite of the Tower of Babel.** The confusion of tongues meant people couldn't work together. Now this gift of tongues allows people to worship beyond language, where the divisive nature of human language, and it is divisive in a sense, is overcome, and **there is a unity restored.** What? From the Holy Spirit, **the unity comes from the Spirit, and it manifests itself in this gift of tongues.**

There is another reference of course in the story of **Pentecost**, also in the Acts of the Apostles, where **the apostles are speaking, presumably in their own language, but everyone who hears them, hears in his own tongue.** In other words, people from Parthia hear in Parthian, or from Cappadocia hear it in Cappadocian, and so on. That is a different gift, or **a different manifestation of the Spirit, again: uniting, unifying, allowing people of different races, cultures, and types to come together.** So it's the opposite of the story of the Tower of Babel. And it's God's gift. **God's gift is a gift of unity,** of gathering together and expressing itself in ways that transcend human culture.