

The Holy Spirit, Pentecost and Speaking in Tongues:

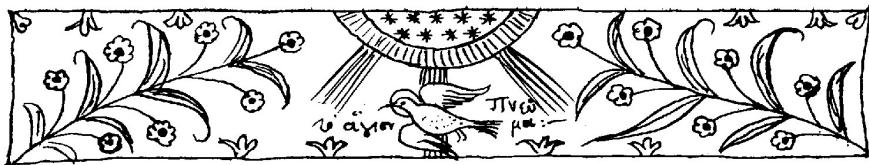
*An Orthodox Christian View
of Glossolalia*



by Paraskevè (Eve) Tibbs, Ph.D.

“For God is not a God of disorder, but of peace...”

- 1 Corinthians 14:33



The Holy Spirit, Pentecost and Speaking in Tongues: An Orthodox View of Glossolalia

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While there is not much discussion about "speaking in tongues" in Orthodox churches, there is certainly a great deal of interest in "tongues" in much of the rest of the Christian world. For most Pentecostal Christians, as an example, speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) is considered a necessary sign that one has been "baptized in the Spirit," has been "saved" and has been given the power of the Spirit to live in holiness. Pentecostals take their name from the Pentecost event described in the Acts of the Apostles, where fifty days after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles with a rush of wind and tongues as of fire, after which they preached the Gospel, and "everyone heard them speak in his own language" (*Acts 2:6*). Today, however, among Pentecostals, speaking in tongues takes the form of non-rational and unintelligible noises, believed to be a private "prayer language" given by the Holy Spirit.

Because of its perceived strangeness and inconsistency with the traditional Orthodox Christian view of what it means to receive the Holy Spirit and to live in holiness, our first inclination is simply to disregard "speaking in tongues" altogether. Several decades ago, when even the mainline Protestant denominations by and large disapproved of what many termed in derision, "holy rollers," there was no consequence to ignoring the relatively small numbers of independent groups of Pentecostal enthusiasts.

However, this growing movement can no longer be overlooked. Most startling might be the statistic that Pentecostal Christians worldwide now number nearly 400 million, approximately 100 million greater than those identifying themselves as Eastern Orthodox Christians. Although Pentecostals are predominantly congregational (i.e. independent) in polity they speak about themselves as being the second largest Christian "group" in the world, next to Roman Catholics.

Why is this number so large and why is it growing? Who are these people and from where did they come? Many of those new to Pentecostalism are former members of mainline Protestant denominations (many of which are now in decline) and are typically people who in all sincerity hunger for a more dynamic and personal experience of God. Despite their lack of formal organization, the twofold challenge to the Orthodox Church is nonetheless a real one: **First**, as pastors, parents, and teachers, we should have a clear understanding as to the Orthodox view on "speaking in tongues" or *glossolalia*, especially in terms of this rapidly growing modern-day Pentecostal movement. **Second**, we do not have to look far to offer something substantial to these folks in Orthodoxy. Surprisingly few people (including many Orthodox) realize that an authentic, truly personal, and mystical connection to Jesus Christ is already abundantly present in the Orthodox spiritual Tradition. Therefore, it is first important for us to understand that the Orthodox Church is fully Pentecostal in the sense that the Holy Spirit is abundantly active in the sacramental life of the Faith – bestowing the "gifts of the Spirit" upon the community of Orthodox faithful, continually giving abundant life and power, and guiding us toward salvation.

Much could be said about the many riches that Orthodoxy has to offer to Pentecostals (and other) Christians. However, in this paper I have limited my study to the specific topic of "speaking in tongues." I will address both the Pentecostal and Orthodox Christian views of the event and "tongues" of Pentecost in Acts 2, followed by a survey of a study by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of

the views of some of the spiritual greats of Orthodoxy on Spirit baptism, prayer and "speaking in tongues," followed by some concluding remarks.

Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles

At the Liturgy of the Resurrection on *Pascha* night¹, the Orthodox Church begins reading from the book of the Acts of the



Apostles, where in the second chapter, we hear of the cataclysmic event of the descent of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles in the upper room in Jerusalem. For Orthodox Christians, this event marks the birth of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, instituted by Jesus Christ, through the creating and sustaining power of the Holy Spirit. But as noted above, we are not the only Christians to claim this event as significant. The modern

Pentecostal movement is said to have begun in 1906 at a revival meeting in a warehouse on Azusa Street, in Los Angeles, where according to the Los Angeles Times (April 18, 1906) "colored people and a sprinkling of whites" suddenly began to speak in a "gurgle of wordless prayer." The newspaper article said they "work[ed] themselves into a state of mad excitement" but those in attendance sincerely believed it was the work of the Holy Spirit, and from there a new worldwide movement was born. Aimee Semple-McPherson, an early Pentecostal preacher and founder of the Foursquare Church, is well-known for her "This is That" speech taken from the opening words of the Apostle Peter's message on the

Day of Pentecost. As St. Peter described the supernatural visitation of the Holy Spirit he declared: "*This is that* which was spoken of by the prophet ..." (*Acts 2:16*). And Pentecostals fervently believe "this" outpouring of the Holy Spirit in their midst, signified especially by *glossolalia*, is exactly the same as "that" which the "apostles themselves" experienced at Pentecost.

But the ancient Fathers of the Church would indeed be surprised to hear that the "apostles themselves" experienced *glossolalia*. The Church Fathers and Orthodox theologians make a clear distinction between the type of tongues at Pentecost, and the tongues mentioned only by St. Paul the Apostle in the context of his admonitions to the Corinthians (*1 Corinthians 13 & 14*). For the Orthodox, (as found in the hymnology of Pentecost) the event of Pentecost is seen not as an event that resulted in many unintelligible sounds, but rather is the reversal of the confusion of the many languages at Babel. Although the multitude of diverse languages was not abolished, they ceased to be a cause of separation; each spoke as before, in his own language, but by the power of the Spirit each could understand the others.² "*Glossologia*" might be a better term in this case, because the Orthodox view of this event is that the Holy Spirit sent the gift of many languages to convey the **one** intelligible *kerygma* of the Gospel. The Gospel was proclaimed not in unintelligible shouts, or an unidentifiable prayer language, but preaching of the highest order – a divinely inspired and very rational proclamation, in an orderly assembly. The apostles indeed experienced the descent of the Holy Spirit in fullness at Pentecost, but not the same kind of unintelligible "tongues" mentioned by St. Paul to the church at Corinth, and which more closely resemble Pentecostalism's *glossolalia*. St. Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians that the gift of "speaking in tongues" is a lesser gift or beginner's gift remains as a prevailing understanding in the writings of the Christian East.³

Pentecostals and Orthodoxy

It may be quite surprising to many Orthodox Christians that Pentecostal scholars are now looking to the rich tradition of

Eastern Orthodox theology and spirituality to find what they hope is a link – a similar ethos to the non-scholastic or "*apophatic*"⁴ approach of the Christian East. Orthodoxy *does* emphasize the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the experience of the glory of God in a way that human language cannot fully define,



and this is very appealing to Pentecostals, many of whom would like to somehow situate their experience of "speaking in tongues" within the context of Orthodoxy's long and respected spiritual Tradition.⁵

Without challenging or minimizing the authenticity of this experience for sincere Pentecostal Christians, there is little or no support for its connection to Orthodoxy. Speaking (or praying) in "tongues," which is so

important to modern Pentecostals, is simply not mentioned (in a positive way) in the writings of even the most prolific mystical theologians of Orthodoxy. As noted by Fr. Thomas Hopko (1939-2015), the former Dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary:

There is no evidence in the spiritual tradition of the church that any of the saints had the gift of praying in tongues or that such kind of prayer was ever a part of the liturgy of the church. The only mention that can be found of it, to our knowledge, was at the baptism of Montanus, a third-century heretic who left the Church to found his own spiritualist sect. If any of the saints or spiritual masters had this gift, they did not write about it or propagate it openly. It was unknown, for example, to Saint John

Chrysostom by his own report. (in his *Commentary on Corinthians*)⁶

That the life-creating and sustaining presence, power and experience of the Holy Spirit is so fundamental in Orthodoxy – but "tongues" is not – cannot help but serve as an important clue to the Church's view.

Gifts of the Spirit

Are the gifts of the Spirit available to us today? St. Symeon the New Theologian, the 10th century mystic and ascetic, one of only three men formally acclaimed as "Theologian" in the Orthodox Church, believes all the *charismata* (the gifts of the Spirit) available to Christians in the apostolic age are equally available to Christians in our own day. But what is this experience and how is it attained? St. Symeon speaks of the need for a "baptism in the Holy Spirit," as do the modern Pentecostals, but for St. Symeon, this takes the form of a "baptism in tears" of repentance, which is not a one-

time event, but a permanent disposition of the soul in repentance, and the continuing experience of God. For the Fathers, this is attained through an unceasing prayer of the heart, which as St. Isaac the Syrian states, "is not so much "our" prayers as the prayer of the Holy Spirit within us."⁷



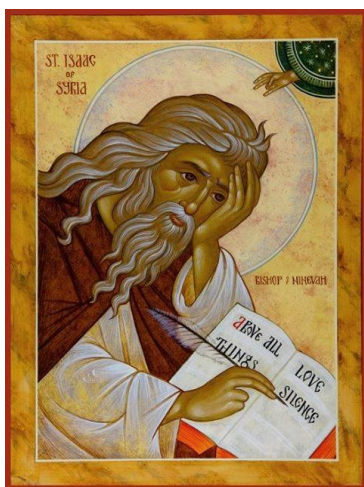
St. John Cassian (360-435AD) learned from the Desert Fathers that prayer in the Spirit "is marked by no vocal expression."⁸ St. Basil the Great (330-379AD) agrees that "we should not express our prayer merely

in syllables, but it is with prayer in syllables that we must all begin." St. Theophan the Recluse (1815-1894) is one who specifically describes the three degrees of prayers, none of which include

glossolalia. In the first stage one repeats words of written prayers. In the second and higher form, the mind is focused on the written words to the point of speaking them as if they were one's own. Finally, the highest form of prayer is reached during which the person prays without words, because God is God of the heart.⁹ Therefore, in the spiritual tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, the type of prayer in which "the spirit intercedes for us...." is not *glossolalia*, but prayer without vocal expression of any kind.¹⁰

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, retired Professor of Orthodox studies at Oxford, presented a study of the personal experience of the Holy Spirit according to the Greek Fathers at the European Pentecostal / Charismatic Research Conference held in Prague in 1997.¹¹ In it he discussed three great spiritual writers: St. Mark the Monk, the works attributed to St. Macarius, and St. John Climacus. St. Mark the Monk, whose works are included in the first volume of the classic collection of Orthodox spiritual texts, *the Philokalia*,¹² wrote that the conscious awareness of the Spirit is in no sense a new grace, but is the full "revelation" of baptismal grace. Metropolitan Kallistos found no reference in St. Mark the Monk about speaking in tongues, and neither did he speak of visions or trances. But St. Mark the Monk did refer to the gift of tears, which are, as noted earlier, prominent in the Orthodox spiritual tradition.¹³ In agreement with St. Mark the Monk, Metropolitan Kallistos noted that Homilies attributed to Macarius also see sacramental Baptism as the foundation of all Christian life, and as the source from which is received the life of the Spirit, in completeness: "Only if we weep shall we experience the 'power' of the Spirit." Metropolitan Kallistos stated that there may be one possible allusion to speaking with tongues, but notes this is an isolated passage which has no parallel elsewhere in the Macarian corpus, and further, that this allusion is counterbalanced with other passages which seem to condemn the use of "unseemly and confused cries" during times of prayer.¹⁴

And third, the 7th century St. John Climacus, in his "Ladder of Divine Ascent," clearly attached great emphasis to personal experience, but also said nothing about speaking in tongues. He saw deep value in the charisma of spiritual tears, as did his contemporary, St. Isaac of Ninevah (Isaac the Syrian) and connected the gift of the Spirit to obedience to a spiritual director. The conclusions which we can gain from Metropolitan Kallistos' study are many, but for the purposes of this paper it might be helpful to observe a few main points: Each of these theologians wrote from his own mystical experience of God, in which sacramental Orthodox Baptism was seen as giving the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and any "baptism with the Holy Spirit" especially the baptism of tears, is the full realization of sacramental Baptism, and not a new and different grace. With regard to tongues, Metropolitan Kallistos concluded that the real significance is that although some Eastern Christian writers are



reticent to describe outward signs that may accompany conscious awareness of the Spirit, even when there is fuller detail, there is reference almost exclusively to the gift of tears, and vision of divine light...any *possible* allusions to speaking with tongues, "are very infrequent."¹⁵

Conclusion

It is quite noteworthy that there is a conspicuous absence of *glossolalia* in the spiritual writers of the Christian East throughout the centuries. But what should we make of this present-day situation in which most Pentecostals are sincere followers of Christ, and equally sincerely believe their "tongues" are from God? Many Church Fathers¹⁶ believe that tongues are no longer necessary in the Church. However, while Metropolitan Kallistos agrees that they are not necessary, he believes

that they may not have disappeared altogether. He offered strong counsel that discernment is always needed; hence the importance in Orthodoxy of seeking the help of an experienced spiritual guide. Discernment he warned, is even more necessary in the case of tongues, and he cautioned that often it is not the Spirit of God that is speaking through the tongues, but the all-too-human spirit of auto-suggestion and mass hysteria, and there may even be occasions when "speaking with tongues" is a form of demonic possession. As St. John the Evangelist states, we must not trust every spirit, "but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (*1 John 4.1*).¹⁷



Pentecostal scholar, Russ Spittler called speaking in tongues "...a broken speech for a broken body of Christ until perfection comes."¹⁸ The Orthodox Church, born on Pentecost through the Holy Spirit, and guided by the Spirit through the centuries, has the perfect presence of Christ in Her midst, and the fullness of the Holy Spirit. It is precisely in the *epiclesis* of the Divine Liturgy where the Holy Spirit descends on us and on the gifts presented, to fill us

with His presence and to make us holy, and to constitute us as the Body of Christ. The Body and Blood of Christ in the chalice, and the assembly of Orthodox believers who, through the Holy Spirit have become the Body of Christ to partake of the Holy Eucharist, cannot be anything but the "perfection" to which Spittler refers. *Every* Divine Liturgy is in a sense a Pentecost for the Orthodox worshippers who celebrate it, a renewal of the gift of the Holy Spirit given to each Orthodox Christian at sacramental Baptism and Chrismation. This is a reality of which most of the 400 million Pentecostal believers are unaware.

So although each Orthodox Christian should seek the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are not to seek spiritual gifts as an

end in themselves. According to Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, gifts that are genuinely spiritual are not to be rejected, but our aim in the life of prayer is not to gain feelings or "sensible" experiences of any particular kind, but simply and solely to conform our will to God's. Let this be our approach. Let us seek and follow Jesus Christ, whom we find in fullness in the Orthodox Church, and let us pray that the Holy Spirit will direct those who genuinely seek a deep and true encounter with Him to His True Church. As St. Paul said to the Corinthians "I seek not what is yours but you" (*1 Corinthians 12:14*) and likewise, we should ultimately seek not the gifts but the Giver.¹⁹

Endnotes

¹ The prayer book of the Pentecostarion is read from Pascha until 50 days hence, at Pentecost.

² Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestwood, 1996), p. 95.

³ St. Symeon Metaphrastes (10th century), paraphrasing the homilies of St. Makarios of Egypt (4th century), writes: Whoever has attained the full measure of mature manhood naturally lays aside childish things (cf. 1 Cor. 13:11). That is why St. Paul says that speaking in tongues and prophecies will come to an end (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8). Just as an adult does not eat foods or use words fitting for a child, he scorns them as unworthy of him, since he has entered another stage of life, so the person who approaches perfection in the evagelical virtues ceases to be an infant with respect to that perfection. To quote St. Paul again, 'When I grew up I finished with childish things' (1 Cor 13:11)." (*The Philokalia*, Volume III, page 303).

⁴ Simply put, *apophatic* theology recognizes that we cannot begin to understand or express the fullness of God's inner life as Trinity. The human mind and human language fail at every attempt. What we can say in honesty, is what God is not...i.e. expressed in negative terms, such as ineffable, uncreated, incorporeal, etc. But more than negative terminology, it is the way of "unknowing" (a*gnwsiva.) according to Dimitru Staniloae, and is above all rooted in the mystical presence of the Uncreated Trinity. See Dimitru Staniloae *The Experience of God* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press: Brookline, 1998) p. 96. Vladimir Lossky states that apophaticism is "above all an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God" See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. the Fellowship of St.

Alban and St. Sergius (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestwood, 1976), pp 38-39).

⁵ Edmund Rybarczk, "Expressing the Inexpressible: Tongues as Apophatic Speech" read at the 31st Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, March, 2002, to which this author presented the Orthodox response.

⁶ Thomas Hopko – "Rainbow series" http://www.oca.org/pages/orth_chri/Orthodox-Faith/Spirituality/Prayer-in-the-Spirit.html

⁷ Kallistos Ware presentation in Prague, 1997. "Personal Experience of the Holy Spirit" available online http://ware.orc.ru/~dmtr/ware_en.htm.

⁸ St. John Cassian, "The Conferences of Cassian," in Owen Chadwick, ed. *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 226.

⁹ Theophan the Recluse, "What is Prayer," Igumen Chariton of Valmo, ed. *The Art of Prayer* (London, 1966), p. 52.

¹⁰ John Warren Morris, "The Charismatic Movement: An Orthodox Evaluation" *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28.02, p. 127.

¹¹ Ware, "Personal Experience."

¹² It is noteworthy that there is no evidence of the practice of tongues in any of the writings of *The Philokalia*, nor the spiritual classic *The Way of the Pilgrim*. See John Warren Morris, above.

¹³ especially in St. John Climacus, St. Isaac the Syrian and St. Symeon the New Theologian.

¹⁴ In Ware, "Personal Experience," quoting from Macarius: "There are some who during prayer make use of unseemly cries, as if relying on their own bodily strength, not realizing how their thoughts deceive them, and thinking that they can achieve perfect success by their own strength."

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ St. John Chrysostom and Nicholas Cabasilas are among those who taught that tongues were no longer necessary to the Church, living in fullness of the Spirit. See John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians* and Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ* trans. by Carmino J. De Cantanzaro, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Crestwood, 1974), pp. 106-07. in John Morris Warren, "The Charismatic Movement" in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 28.2 (Summer 1983).

¹⁷ Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 101.

¹⁸ Russell Spittler, "Glossolalia," *Dictionary of Pentecostal-Charismatic Movements*, eds. Gary B. McGee et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), p. 441.

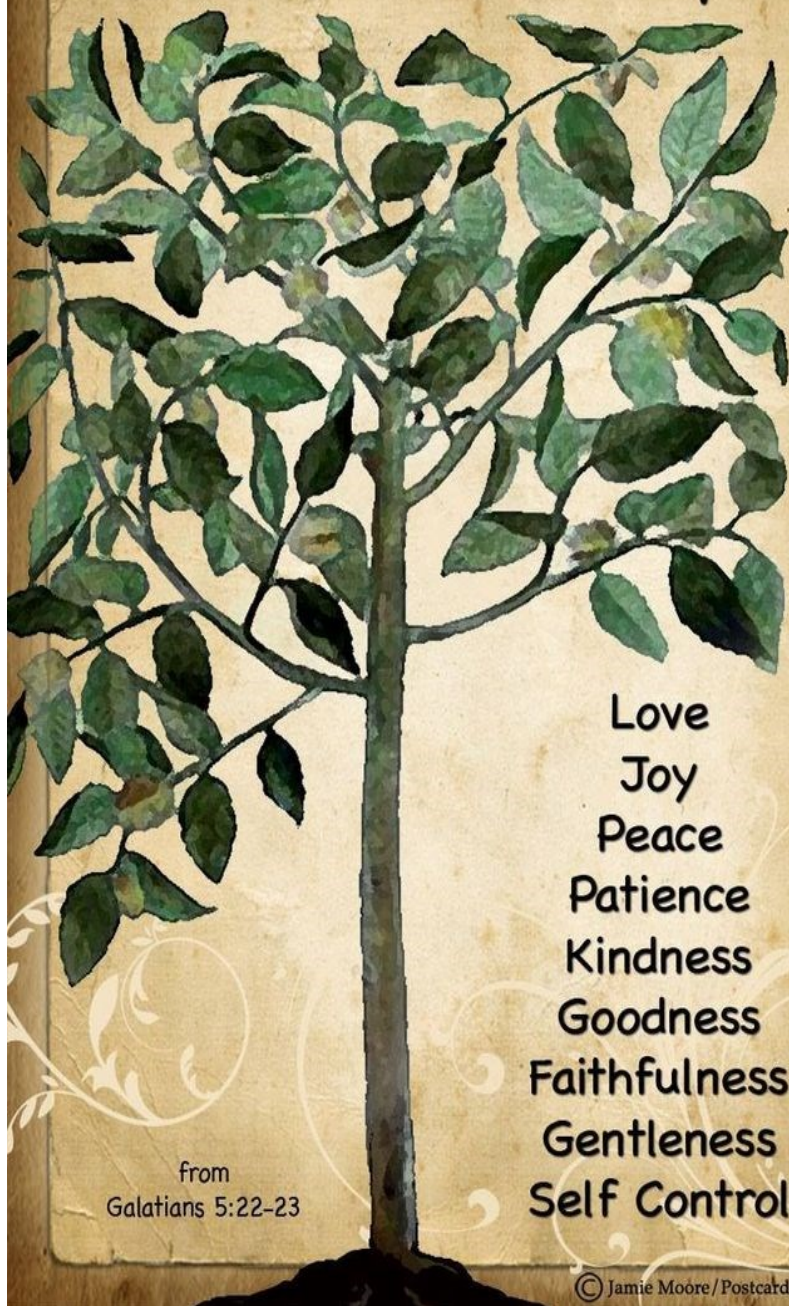
¹⁹ Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 102.



**The merciful Lord sent the Holy Spirit
and by the Holy Spirit the Church was established.
No one—of themselves—can know what God’s love is
unless they are taught by the Holy Spirit.
God’s love is known in our Church by the Holy Spirit.
The Holy Spirit lives in our Church in the sacraments;
in the Holy Scriptures; and in the hearts of the faithful.
The Holy Spirit unites all men and so the saints are close
to us; and when we pray to them, they hear our prayers
in the Holy Spirit, and our souls feel that they are praying
for us.
How happy and blessed are we Orthodox Christians,
that the Lord has given us life in the Holy Spirit!
Blessed are we Orthodox Christians that the Lord loves us
and gives us the grace of the Holy Spirit!**

-St. Silouan of Mt. Athos (1865-1938)

The Fruit of the Spirit



Love
Joy
Peace
Patience
Kindness
Goodness
Faithfulness
Gentleness
Self Control

from
Galatians 5:22-23

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