THE SYMBOLISM OF CHARISMATIC GLOSSOLALIA

1. Introduction

The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have been characterised by the phenomenon of 'speaking in tongues', otherwise known as glossolalia. In this century, perhaps, more than any other it has been a cause of debate, discussion and division. Within this debate there has been a variety of definitions and descriptions. In general terms Pentecostals and Charismatic regard it as a special language gift which is used in praise and prayer, which can approximate to prophecy when interpreted. It is variously understood by participants in the movements to be unlearned human languages (xenolalia), heavenly/angelic languages or some spiritual language which defies description. Some Classical Pentecostals also understand glossolalia to be the definitive sign of being overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit subsequent to conversion, called Baptism in the Spirit. More recent members of the Charismatic Movement, whilst valuing the gift, prefer not to stress this particular aspect of the gift.

For our purposes the definition of V.S. Poythress will suffice. He describes glossolalia as free vocalisation:

Free vocalisation (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 the 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 lightly suppose that it was an unknown language (Poythress, 1979: 369).

Poythress understands that free vocalisation of this type occurs within the context of Pentecostal and Charismatic worship.

This paper arises out of a research project which aims to understand the nature and function of charismatic glossolalia. The New Church Movement fits within the broader Charismatic Movement and has developed out of the British House Church Movement (Walker, 1985; Scotland, 1994). The empirical data used within this paper is drawn from a case study of such a church, which is pseudonymously entitled: 'Sudley Christian Fellowship.' The broader research project includes both qualitative and quantitative
approaches to empirical data and is based on a modified version of the empirical-theological cycle of J.A. van der Ven (1993; Cartledge, 1996, 1998a). This qualitative case study is located within the inductive stage of van der Ven’s cycle. For the purposes of the paper, I have reconsidered the material through certain social-psychological and theological perspectives.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is fourfold: (1) to describe key social-psychological interpretations which have been used to identify the symbolic quality of glossolalia; (2) to describe the case study of the church and present data containing the symbolic features of glossolalia; (3) to reflect upon the beliefs described within the case study in light of the hypotheses; and (4) to offer a comment on the theological praxis of those who inhabit this particular life-world.

2. Social-psychological interpretations

William J. Samarin in his seminal work on glossolalia from a socio-linguistic perspective identifies four distinct symbolic features (Samarin, 1972: 198-202). First, glossolalia is a symbol of change. It symbolises the transition from the non-charismatic life to the charismatic life. As such it is an initiation or transition rite. It sets the charismatic believer apart in an act of ‘bridge-burning’. It is a commitment act which is dedicated to change. It therefore symbolises the transition into the social group from outside (Archer, 1974; Lapsley & Simpson, 1965). However, Samarin does not expect this symbolic value to be held by those born into the Charismatic Movement (Samarin, 1972:199). Second, glossolalia is a symbol of proof. It does not merely symbolise the new but also the supernatural. That is why, according to Samarin, some Pentecostals and Charismatics associate it with Baptism in the Spirit. It thereby provides proof that God has influenced the person supernaturally (Archer, 1974). Indeed, according to Samarin, “there seems to be a correlation between the degree to which one supernaturalises glossolalia in particular and the way one interprets life in general: for many Pentecostals of one variety or another, religion is excitingly experiential rather than rational or contemplative. For these people glossolalia has value as a supernatural linguistic ‘happening’” (Samarin, 1972:200). Third, glossolalia symbolises submission. When a person yields himself or herself to God then God is understood to take over. As Samarin says: ‘This is also why the symbol is so real. Every time a person speaks in tongues, performing an act that is cognitively meaningless, he is reminded that he is being used by God... Correlated with submission is an acknowledgement of one’s helplessness and fallibility. Glossolalists talk about the inadequacies of their understanding and the limitation of their knowledge’ (Samarin, 1972:200-201). Fourth, glossolalia is a symbol of self-assertion.