Can the Behavior of Tongues Utterance Still Function as Ecclesial Boundary? The Significance of Art and Sacrament

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"will not they say that ye are mad?" — St. Paul

"These men are full of new wine" — The Jerusalem Proselytes

"these are not drunken, as ye suppose" — St. Peter

"But if all prophesy (in contrast to speaking in tongues)... thus are the secrets of (the unbeliever’s) heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is in you of a truth." — St. Paul

"How hear we every man in our own tongue wherein we were born?...we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God." — The Jerusalem Proselytes

"For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth but my understanding is unfruitful...I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also." — St. Paul

Even a brief sampling of the relatively small body of New Testament texts that refer to the phenomenon of tongues reveals a confusingly diverse, convoluted, and involved landscape of opinion. In the New Testament, competing understandings of the function and meaning of tongues seem to arise with every mention of the behavior and every moment of its operation. For the emerging church, and especially to the Corinthian assembly and Paul, this ecstatic phenomenon appears to be both an asset and a liability, functioning as both
blessing and curse.¹

Such is the nature of the Christian graces. Existing at the intersection of the transcendent and the tangible, the revealed and the mysterious, the physical and the spiritual, the crucial aspects of the faith of Jesus hold tensions always within their realities. The God-who-is-human gives to Christ's body-that-is-his-followers the memorial of the bread-that-is-his-flesh and the wine-that-is-his-blood. Here death is life, the last are first and to be master is to serve. It is a universe of existences with competing and contradictory identities.

Throughout its long history and in its various incarnations, the church has repeatedly struggled to resolve the tensions inherent in its central practices and doctrines through clear articulation. In order to attempt this task it has borrowed widely from the human disciplines. Literary, historical, scientific, philosophical, sociological, and a multitude of other methodologies have been employed to assist the theologians of Christianity in voicing the truths that they have known through experience "which cannot be uttered." Unfortunately, the result of these articulations has frequently been the ongoing fragmentation of the community of faith as disagreements arise about the yields of such methods. Each articulation clarifies, but each articulation also occludes. The same statement that establishes an orthodox tends to create a heretic.

The recurrence of the phenomenon of tongues in the twentieth century has brought the contemporary church once more to just such a crisis of articulation. Ministers, theologians, and laity are repeatedly presented with the dilemma of identification and must ask themselves, "What exactly IS this tongues-thing? How does it work? Is it good or bad? From God or of humankind? True or false?" The behavior is among us and once again we face the daunting prospect that clarification of

¹See especially 1 Cor. 14.22-23. This parallels the operation of the Eucharist as an agency of judgment in 1 Cor. 11.29-30.