The Experience of Glossolalia and the Spirit’s Empathy: Romans 8:26 Revisited

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Romans 8:26 has been the subject of protracted scholarly debate. It is a text to which Pentecostals have appealed as scriptural support for the practice of speaking in tongues.¹ This interpretation, however, goes against the majority view. Representative of the protesters is James D.G. Dunn, who states, “Had he [Paul] wished his readers to think of glossolalia he would have written with greater care.”² The reason for the divided opinion is that Romans 8:26 is notorious for its ambiguity; much of the difficulty revolves around the uncertainty in the meaning of the word ἀλάλητος, which occurs only here in biblical Greek. Does it mean that which is “wordless” in the sense of not being vocalized and without sound, an inner sigh for which there is no words, and therefore does it refer to silent praying?³ Does it mean that which is “wordless,” not necessarily implying without sound or vocalization but in the sense of being inarticulate, unable to speak distinctly in sounds that conform to a recognizable language, which is comparable to glossolalia?

In support of a reference to glossolalic utterance in Romans 8:26 is the unlikelihood of silent prayer in antiquity. Even praying in private was

¹ Gordon D. Fee is the most prominent of the New Testament Pentecostal scholars who promote this position. After much deliberation he concludes that he must interpret this against the majority view and read Romans 8:26 as a reference to glossolalia (God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 577, n. 311). The Pentecostal interpretation of Romans 8:26 has found surprising support in the person of Ernst Käsemann (trans. M. Kohl, “The Cry for Liberty in the Worship of the Church,” in Perspectives on Paul [Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1996], 130).

² James D.G. Dunn, Romans 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 479. Perhaps some might also put the question to Dunn, “If in Romans 8:26, Paul had silent prayer in mind (Dunn’s claim, p. 478), then why did he not use greater care in using more explicit vocabulary?” Some Pentecostal scholars also take the majority opinion and reject the view that here Paul refers to glossolalia (D. Lim, Spiritual Gifts: A Fresh Approach [Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1991], 140, n. 3).

accomplished by mouthing words and praying aloud. This is attested in the narrative of Daniel 6:10-13, in which Daniel was heard praying to God instead of to King Darius. It is implied that the contents of the prayers of both the Pharisee and the tax collector were spoken aloud when Jesus quotes them in Luke 18:9-14. Besides this, Paul had more definitive vocabulary at his disposal, such as ἀνεκλάλητος, which specifically means “inexpressible” in the sense of “wordless/indescribable,” and is used as such in 1 Peter 1:8, Polycarp to the Philippians 1:3, Ignatius to the Ephesians 19:2. Also in Romans 8:26, Paul does not appear to be making comments about praying in general, particularly when he claims that “we do not know what to pray for as we should.” The entire New Testament, including Paul himself, assumes some knowledge of what to pray, whether it is intercession, thanksgiving, or adoration in prayer. This verse stands unique in the New Testament, because what Paul communicates is a complete incapacity for even Christians to express the right type of prayer in these circumstances. To claim that this is a reference to “silent praying” is to do an injustice to the unprecedented nature of the experience of the Spirit praying on behalf of the believer. Consequently, this verse suits the unique phenomenon of glossolalic experience better than a general silent groaning that could hypothetically accompany all types of praying.

Ultimately, contextual matters should be the determinants. Romans 8:26 is set within the context of the dialectic of Christian life between the present and future, with specific prominence given to the Spirit’s function. In verses 1-17a, Paul uses triumphant language to describe the future age realized in the present. In verses 17b-27, however, the triumphant language is tempered by the realities of the present age of suffering (v. 17b,18), futility (v. 20), corruption (v. 21), and weakness (v. 26). Romans 8:26 is descriptive of the sustaining function of the Spirit, which is concurrent with God’s redemptive plan enacted but not yet culminated. Within this context Paul describes the paradoxical reality of the experience of glossolalia as “groanings.” Even though glossolalia is an expression of the eschatological Spirit and the Pauline churches consider

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5 Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 64.
7 The frequency of the word πνεύμα in Romans 8 is telling. It is used only six times in chapters 1-7 and eight times in chapters 9-16. In Romans 8, it is used twenty one times (an exception is in v. 16, where it most likely means “human spirit”).
8 Opposed to the old age of sin (vv. 2, 3, 10), flesh (vv. 3-9, 12, 13), and death (vv. 2, 6) is a description of the Spirit who dispenses life (vv. 2, 6, 10).