

## Some Words About...

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### **Glossa (language)**

Once a theory pervades a translation, it becomes almost invulnerable. A case in point is the New Testament use of *glossa*.

#### **In the Septuagint**

*Glossa* is used in the Septuagint in three senses. It means the “tongue”; it means “speech”; and it means “language.” The latter use occurs in Genesis 10:5; 11:6-7; Isaiah 19:18; 33:19; 50:4; Jeremiah 5:15; Ezekiel 3:5,6; Daniel 3-7; and elsewhere.

The uses in Daniel are particularly revealing. To signify that a decree is intended for all the subjects in the empire, a phrase like “peoples, nations, and languages” was used. It recognized the fact that people can be racially the same and belong to the same nation, yet be separated by language barriers. Afghanistan is a current example.

#### **New Testament**

The Septuagint uses are followed by New Testament writers.

The first two uses are easily recognized and translated. The third has suffered from preconceptions.

Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9,13:7, 14:6, and 17:15 all follow the pattern in Daniel of specifying language differences, for example, “every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9).

Acts 2:4, 10:46, and 19:6 clearly refer to foreign languages recognized by foreign outsiders despite Galilean accents.

And there is Paul writing to Corinth, a seaport awash with foreigners. Speaking of various gifts which the Holy Spirit gives, he says, “...to another, different kinds of language, to another the interpretation of languages” (1 Corinthians 12:10). And he builds on that at the end of the chapter (12:28-30). Even today people who are fluent in many languages are said to have a gift for dealing with languages, though the Holy Spirit is not always given the credit. Paul follows with his description of the importance of love, beginning with “If I speak the languages of men and of the angels and have not love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal” (13:1).

Acknowledging that God can understand no matter what language we use, Paul says “One speaking languages speaks not to men but to God if no man understands him” (14:2). This is emphasized later in the paragraph “If I pray in a language, my spirit prays but my mind is fruitless” (11:14). Anyone with immigrant parents or grandparents knows what Paul is saying. Some people easily pray in German, Swedish, Norwegian, or whatever and find it spiritually satisfying even if their minds are not focused on what the prayer says. And so it is that “one speaking in a language gratifies himself, but he who professes gratifies the church. I wish all of you to speak languages, yet more, I wish you to profess, that the church may be gratified, for the one who professes is more important than the one speaking languages unless he interpret” (14:4-5).

Then “if I come to you speaking languages, what good will that do you?” (14:6) and “if you utter words in a language unintelligible, how shall it be known what is spoken?” (14:9) “He who speaks in a language should pray to interpret” (14:13). He says, “I thank God that I speak more languages than all of you, but in church I wish to speak five intelligible words that I might teach others than ten thousand words in a language” (14:18-19).

“Languages are a sign for unbelievers not for believers while professing is not for unbelievers but for believers. So, if the whole church assembles in one place and they are speaking many languages, and there come uneducated unbelievers, won't they call you crazy? But if all are professing, and an uneducated unbeliever comes, he is enlightened by everything, he is informed by everything” (14:22-23).

“When you assemble, one has a psalm, one has a teaching, one has a revelation, one has a language, one has an interpretation. Let everything be done helpfully If someone speaks a language or two or at most three in succession, have an interpretation. If there is no interpretation, let him keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God” (14:26-28).

“Therefore, my brothers, be eager to profess, but do not forbid speaking languages” (14:39).

As for ecstatic speaking, the New Testament knows nothing of it unless *kenophonia* (1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 2:16) or *mataiologia* (1 Timothy 1:6,) can be shown to refer to it.

### **Today**

Essentially, Paul wanted communication in the church to benefit the hearers, not to show off the speakers. And in that sense, we may apply his words when we preach and teach.

Watch when you use the following words and phrases. The next time you are tempted to use the word “intentional,” be sure to explain exactly what you mean by it (“unintentional” needs no explanation). Refrain from saying “reinvent” and “he gives 150 percent.” Don’t speak of all changes as being “challenging.” And if you are asked to describe a new book on ecumenism.. oh, well.

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