The gift of tongues in the post-apostolic church: a rejoinder to Cleon Rogers

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In 1965 Cleon Rogers published a short study about the gift of tongues in the centuries after the apostles.[1] It is late in the day to refute an article already a half century old; but since people keep quoting it as authoritative, it is worthwhile pointing out some of its grave logical and historical flaws.

Rogers examines the Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Montanus, Origen, Chrysostom; he sums up his argument (143):

After examining the testimony of the early Christian leaders whose ministry represents practically every area of the Roman Empire from approximately A.D. 100 to 400, it appears that the miraculous gifts of the first century died out and were no longer needed to establish Christianity.

Furthermore, it is very evident that even if the gift were in existence, in spite of all the testimony to the contrary, it was neither widespread nor the normal Christian experience. The only clear reference to anything resembling the phenomena is connected with the heretic Montanus and those influenced by his erroneous views of the Spirit. All of the evidence points to the truth of Paul's prophecy when he says “tongues shall cease” (I Cor. 13:8).

Even for the reader who wishes to be positively disposed, Rogers makes broad claims out of meager evidence. He also commits a number of logical fallacies and factual errors, which we will now examine.

1. Argument from silence

Rogers is quick to concede that he must rely on Argumentum ex silentio, but proposes that in this case, silence – or as he should have said, a little testimony – is proof of the absence of that charism: “if the gift of tongues were widespread and in abundance, it would surely have been alluded to or mentioned in some way.” (135) Again, in the case of one father, “Polycarp nowhere indicates that tongues are a part of the normal character of Christianity; in fact, he does not even
touch on the subject of tongues.” (136) Rogers is simply begging the question by asking, The fathers would have talked more about tongues, wouldn't they? He seems to believe that their teachings exhausted all aspects of Christian doctrine in their epistles (which were by their nature occasional) and in their other books, and that the absence (and again we must insist, near absence) of tongues in the literature is proof of their extinction. Given the testimony of Irenaeus, see below, one wonders how much evidence would be needed to be convincing.

If we were to apply Rogers’ approach to the New Testament canon, we would have to give it up as unworkable. If just one document, 1 Corinthians, were not available to us, we would conclude from Acts that tongues were an initial sign of receiving the Spirit and that there was no practice of tongues after a person was converted; nor would we know of the existence of interpretation of tongues, word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, discernment, administration or helps. None of the gospels – with the exception of the Long Ending of Mark, 16:17 - refer to tongues; in fact, they are absent from 25 books of the canon, and most importantly, the lists of gifts in Eph 4, 1 Pet 4 and Rom 12 do not mention tongues. Why such a paucity of evidence, in an environment where tongues were a known spiritual gift?

Like the authors of the NT epistles, the church fathers wrote in order to address the topics of the day, not to produce comprehensive guides to the Christian life or doctrine; scholars who speculate on what must have been or should have been said will soon find themselves on shaky ground.

Rogers wants to “determine if tongues were still practiced as they were in the times of the apostles” (134). Since therefore we possess almost no information about tongues even in apostolic times, and little about its use in post-apostolic times, the comparison of one data set with another is bound to disappoint.

2. Unwarranted appeals to authority

Rogers quotes others’ opinions as fact; two examples will suffice. First (139), that “Robertson is right in saying, ‘[Irenaeus’] rather vague statement may rest on some report as to the Montanists of Asia Minor...’”[2] Truly? How do we know this?

He also cites as fact (141) that it was glossolalia that the Montanists practiced, since Hans Lietzmann says it is so.[3] That opinion is highly questionable, as we shall see. But even then, Lietzmann does not say anything of the sort, but rather that the Montanists – with the sole exception of Montanus at the beginning of his experience – prophesied.

Lietzmann and Robertson are scholars of repute, but we cannot accept their declarations as fact simply on someone’s say-so.
3. A misunderstanding of Montanism

The Montanists were an apocalyptic Christian sect that practiced super-spirituality and claimed that they were the fulfillment of 1 Cor 13, that “when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.” For them, their new prophecies were the coming of perfection. They published their inspired books as God’s truth.

What set the Montanists apart, besides a limited set of new and strange doctrines (concerning, for example, asceticism, fasting, widowhood, martyrdom), was the manner in which they prophesied. Eusebius draws on earlier tradition to portray how odd was their display in the eyes of the contemporary church. One of his sources said:

he became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying in a manner contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning. Some of those who heard his spurious utterances at that time were indignant, and they rebuked him as one that was possessed, and that was under the control of a demon, and was led by a deceitful spirit, and was distracting the multitude; and they forbade him to talk, remembering the distinction drawn by the Lord and his warning to guard watchfully against the coming of false prophets. (An unnamed observer of the 2nd century, from Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.7-8, NPNF 2, 1 : 231).

Eusebius then offers a quotation from Miltiades, another contemporary of Montanus:

They cannot show that one of the old or one of the new prophets was thus carried away in spirit. Neither can they boast of Agabus, or Judas, or Silas, or the daughters of Philip, or Ammia in Philadelphia, or Quadratus, or any others not belonging to them. (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.17.3, NPNF 2,1: 234)

There is debate over how to relate their prophetic utterances to the biblical *charismata*. The best explanation is that neither the Montanists nor their opponents related the utterances to speaking in tongues. Rather, their ecstatic manifestations were consistently labeled as prophecy, whether true or false, by both sides; thus, a contemporary witness reports that it is “not prophecy, as they call it, but rather false prophecy” (see Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.4); again, as above, they were “prophesying in a manner contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning.” That is, their style of prophecy was unlike its counterpart in the church of the 2nd-century. One of the names of the group was the New Prophecy.

Tertullian was influenced by Montanism. Still, as we shall see below, Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 5.8), like Irenaeus before him (*Against Heresies* 5.6.1), distinguished between tongues and prophecy. The same is true of Eusebius; he was not against prophecy as such, since he
affirms the gift in Ammia and Quadratus, who probably prophesied in the early second century, before the coming of Montanus.

Montanist prophecies were ecstatic and in a trance, babbling wildly but in known language, which the person upon awakening supposedly did not remember having said. Rogers should have carefully qualified or set aside the idea that, “About the only clear statement regarding the manifestation of tongues is found in Eusebius’ description of the activity of Montanus.” (141)

4. Special pleading regarding Irenaeus

Rogers believes that, “if the gift of tongues were widespread and in abundance, it would surely have been alluded to or mentioned in some way.” (135) Well, to give one vital testimony, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (Gaul), makes the most important positive statement in AD 180 that tongues did exist in his time.

Rogers engages in contortions as he tries to defuse this text (138-40), which we shall unpack below: first, Rogers claims that “Montanism was one of the bad elements in Lyons” (139) and that Irenaeus himself was under its influence; that “this is clearly described by Eusebius who says that some of the martyrs of Lyons possessed some of the spiritual gifts of Montanus and his followers” (139 n. 30, referring to Eusebius Hist. eccl. 5.3, with Lietzmann again invoked for good effect). In fact, Eusebius said no such thing; incredibly, Rogers confuses one man, Alcibiades of Lyon, with a Phrygian man in Hist. eccl. 5.4 who may have been called Alcibiades, but whose name was probably Miltiades. Rogers also proposes that a group of Montanists of Lyon commandeered Irenaeus to take a letter to Eleutherus, bishop of Rome, in order to plead their cause – this is one interpretation of the letter; a better is that the martyrs were urging Rome to take a harder line against the Montanists. In fact, Eusebius, who had no patience for Montanism, commented that these “brethren in Gaul set forth their own prudent and most orthodox judgment in the matter” (Hist. eccl. 5.3.4). From a few references in Eusebius, loosely interpreted, Rogers constructs an entire Montanist community, which according to the story duped Irenaeus – a man of no small intellect – to run interference for their doctrine. Rogers then argues that Irenaeus had only “heard about” the gift of tongues, back when he lived in Asia Minor, and that he was no first-hand witness of its manifestation. But which is it? This is odd, making Irenaeus say: “There were Montanists in Asia, which I heard about; no, there were Montanists in Lyon, which I heard, and they fooled me into thinking it was the real gift; no, I never heard glossolalia, not first-hand.” Which was it, Irenaeus? Or better, which was it, Cleon Rogers?

After this introduction to a key text, presented in such a dubious light, let us read what Irenaeus actually said in Against Heresies 5.6.1 (ANF 1: 531), from c. AD 180:
For this reason does the apostle declare, “We speak wisdom among them that are perfect,”
terming those persons “perfect” who have received the Spirit of God, and who through the Spirit
of God do speak in all languages, as [Paul] used himself also to speak. In like manner we do also
hear many brethren in the Church, who possess prophetic gifts, and those who through the Spirit
speak all kinds of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men,
and declare the mysteries of God…[4]

The pivotal phrase is “we do also hear many brethren.” Rogers, following the ANF footnote,
states (139) that “the old Latin uses the perfect *audivimus*, ‘we have heard’”, that is, that they do
not currently hear people speaking in tongues in Lyon. In fact the Latin should normally be
translated as “we hear.” But the larger question is why Rogers chooses to exegete the secondary,
Latin version, when we have a quote from the original Greek in Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.7.6 (PNF
2, 1: 567); beyond which, we now possess the passage in manuscript form.[5] The phrase in
Greek is *pollōn akouomen adelphōn*. Some observations: first, the verb is plainly the present
tense, “we hear,” not “we have heard.” Second, the Greek verb *akouō* usually takes the genitive
case as its direct object; in short, this means that he says “we hear brothers” not “we
hear of or about brothers”; in fact, this is the only way to take the Latin direct object as well, with
its *multos audivimus fratres*. Third, he states that there are “many brothers” (or better, “many
brothers and sisters”) whom “we” have heard. Fourth, his intent is to draw a line from those who
are speaking in tongues now back to the apostle who spoke in tongues at the time of 1
Corinthians.[6] Fifth, Irenaeus clearly links the phrase *pollōn akouomen adelphōn*, that is, many
brethren speaking in tongues. Therefore, *the text explicitly states that Irenaeus and others heard
at first hand many contemporary brethren who prophesied and heard many contemporary
brethren speaking in all sorts of tongues, that is, he cannot be speaking of isolated instances.*

It is imperative to note that Irenaeus marks the difference between tongues and “the prophetic
gift”; like everyone else who went on record, he would have regarded the Montanist practice as a
perversion of prophecy, not of glossolalia.

The testimony of Irenaeus is clear and forceful. For his part, Rogers summarizes (140) that “it
must be concluded that Irenaeus meant that he and those around him had at some past time heard
of things like those heard in Montanists circles.” In no way is this what “must be concluded,”
since Irenaeus says that “we hear many brothers and sisters” – true co-believers – speaking in
tongues; and he did not mean New Prophecy, since no-one in his day identified Montanist pagan-
style, or “mantic”, prophecy with the gift of tongues. Irenaeus, like most Catholics and like
Eusebius after him, plainly disallowed the Montanist style of prophecy when he asserted that
when the Spirit speaks through a person he takes the “form and shape in the likeness of the
person concerned”[7]: a prophet speaks with their normal voice, not in an ecstasy. In addition,
Irenaeus heartily rejects the Montanist reading of 1 Cor 13:8-12, which supposedly promised the
coming of the Paraclete in Montanism.[8]
5. Straw Man arguments

Justin Martyr’s “silence that the gift was not an integral or important part of Christian doctrine is significant,” says Rogers (137). Very well: but I for one do not believe that glossolalia was so important a part of Christian doctrine that must have been on any short list of patristic teachings.

“Regarding the whole of Irenaeus’ works it could be said that certainly the main thrust and emphasis of his theology was not on the gift of tongues” (140). My goodness, who imagines that it would be?

“...if the gift [of tongues] were of great importance, both the teacher [Polycarp] and his pupil [Irenaeus] should have stressed it. They did not” (139). In fact, as we have just seen, Irenaeus does mention glossolalia in clear terms – but why must we imagine that if it existed, the gift was of “great importance” to him or to anyone, whether in the first or second century? As for Polycarp, the one epistle we have from him, Polycarp to the Philippians, is about the length of Paul’s letter to the Philippians; why would anyone expect that Polycarp’s short letter would have to mention the gift of tongues when, to take one example, Paul’s letter to the Philippians does not, even though the apostle wrote at a time when, as all concede, the gift was being practiced?

One might also mention that according to Rogers (143), “The evidence…does not indicate that tongues had a significant place in the church from A.D. 100 to 400.” The label is a loose one: anything might have a place, but anything might be said not to have a significant place. If we take Irenaeus’ word, tongues was widely practiced in the non-Montanist church, enough so that he and other Christians heard “many” speaking in tongues first-hand, and that they were witnesses to “all kinds of languages.”

6. Basic misinterpretations of Tertullian, Origen

Like others influenced by Montanism, Tertullian believed that the Paraclete was giving new revelation. In his Against Marcion, Tertullian discourses on 1 Cor 12 and shows how the Marcionite heresy contrasts poorly with the true faith. Among other challenges:

Let Marcion then exhibit, as gifts of his god, some prophets, such as have not spoken by human sense, but with the Spirit of God, such as have both predicted things to come, and have made manifest the secrets of the heart; let him produce a psalm, a vision, a prayer –only let it be by the Spirit, in an ecstasy, that is, in a rapture, whenever an interpretation of tongues has occurred to him; let him show to me also, that any woman of boastful tongue in his community has ever prophesied from amongst those specially holy sisters of his. Now all these signs (of spiritual gifts) are forthcoming from my side without any difficulty… (Against Marcion 5.8, ANF 3: 446-47).
Rogers makes the following comment:

When [Tertullian] comes to the spiritual gifts as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14, he acknowledges that all do not have the same gifts, but that the Spirit has given different gifts to different men. *He merely discusses what Paul says about the gifts and makes no reference to the use of the gift in his time.* He calls on Marcion to duplicate these gifts as exhibited by the apostles, but does not say that he has seen or knows of any one who exercises the gift [i.e., of tongues] (140, emphasis added).

This statement is poorly crafted and gives the implication that no-one in Tertullian’s day was practicing any charismata of revelation. Since Rogers jumps back and forth between the gift of tongues and other revelatory gifts, the casual reader will miss an important distinction. The words in italics should be more properly framed thus: *Tertullian discusses what Paul says about all the gifts, makes no reference to the use of tongues per se in his own time, but does make reference to the contemporary manifestation of the interpretation of tongues and all other charismata, and in other passages, the gift of prophecy.*

Tertullian’s argument would have fallen apart if he were not referring to the present experience of psalms, visions, hymns, prophecies, prayers, interpretations of tongues – and all in “a rapture,” that is, in a frenzy, in the Montanist mode that existed only after the AD 160s. He contrasts the lack of gifts among the Marcionite “community” and says they are forthcoming “from my side,” that is, among believers of his day, not of a century and a half earlier. No-one who has read the collected writings of Tertullian would conclude anything other than that he believed that God was giving new prophetic revelation in his day. Here he also claims that someone gives an interpretation of tongues; where there is smoke there is fire, and a charismatic “interpretation of tongues” implies that there must have been charismatic glossolalia. What effect his Montanist leanings had on glossolalia, we cannot now tell; what we do know is that Tertullian distinguished between tongues and prophecy/New Prophecy. It may be significant, although an argument from silence, that he does not say that glossolalia was “ecstatic,” only that its interpretation was.

Rogers does not quote Tertullian’s statement in *Exhortation to Chastity* (ANF 4: 53):

> For apostles have the Holy Spirit properly, who have Him fully, in the operations of prophecy, and the efficacy of (healing) virtues, and the evidences of tongues; not partially, as all others have.

This might possibly be taken to mean that prophecy, healing and tongues were practiced only by apostles, although 1 Cor 12-14 indicate that they were not. Nevertheless, Tertullian most certainly believed that there were prophets operating in the church of his day.
Rogers omits to mention a very similar passage in Ambrose's *On the Holy Spirit* (NPNF 2:10, 134), from the 380s.

For it is said: “To one is given through the Spirit the gift of healings, to another divers kinds of tongues, to another prophecy.” So, then, the Spirit gives [present tense] the same gifts as the Father, and the Son also gives them.

We turn to Origen, who in *Contra Celsum* (c. AD 248) made an important statement (similar to the teaching of Justin and Irenaeus), that Christians, not Jews or pagans, possessed the gift of prophecy:

For never have any of those who have not embraced our faith done any thing approaching to what was done by the ancient prophets; and in more recent times, since the coming of Christ, no prophets have arisen among the Jews, who have confessedly been abandoned by the Holy Spirit on account of their impiety towards God, and towards Him of whom their prophets spoke. (Origen *Against Celsus* 7.8, ANF 4: 614)

Origen’s impression was that the incidence of tongues was in decline in his day, although it is not clear how he calculated this:

the Holy Spirit gave signs of His presence at the beginning of Christ’s ministry, and after His ascension He gave still more; but since that time these signs have diminished, although there are still traces of His presence in a few who have had their souls purified by the Gospel, and their actions regulated by its influence. (Origen *Against Celsus* 7.8 ANF 4: 614).

Beyond this Rogers simply takes out of context the statement of Origen that “For no prophet bearing any resemblance to the ancient prophets have appeared in the time of Celsus” (7.11, ANF 4: 615), that is, c. AD 178. Rogers: “What Origen is saying is that no longer are there any of these gifts in operation! Origen does not say the gift of tongues is flourishing at his time, but rather that such gifts have diminished!” (142) This is a baffling pair of sentences: *they don’t exist*, and besides which, *they are diminishing* – one statement or the other may be true, but not both. Similarly, Rogers will conclude (143) that the miraculous gifts “died out”; but “even if the gift were in existence” it was not widespread or normal. Again, Roger's take is that according to Origen “these things have diminished and are no longer widespread.” (142) One simply cannot have it both ways – either they no longer exist, or they do exist, albeit with less frequency than before.

But before the statement in 7.11, Origen had already observed in 7.8 that “traces” of the gifts were still in evidence in his own time, and he relates that experience to Pentecost. What Origen is saying is that there are no prophets in his day of the same nature as the prophets of the Old Testament, whose words were written down in books, studied and revered. In fact, apart
from the Montanists, Christians in the second and third centuries AD did not write down their prophecies as inspired books – Origen is quite correct to say that there are no prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, or the twelve minor prophets.

One additional tension shows up in his use of Origen, who wishes to favorably compare Christianity with paganism and Judaism. This one reason why he makes reference to tongues, as Rogers too believes (142). Nevertheless, Rogers does not find that significant, even though he had said of Justin that “he shows the superiority of Christianity over Judaism and it would have been an excellent opportunity to point to the gift of tongues as proof of his thesis” (137). Justin did not do so, but Origen did – so why is the argument significant by its omission in Justin but not significant when it is indeed used by Origen or Irenaeus?

7. A misinterpretation of how the church fathers understood 1 Cor 13:8

When Rogers says the evidence is in place to show that “tongues will cease” after the apostolic age, he omits a key bit of information: with almost no exceptions, when they speak of 1 Cor 13:8-12, the orthodox Christian fathers from the mid-second century onward are on record as saying that it will be fulfilled in the eschaton.[9] These include Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Archelaus, Methodius, Lactantius, Athanasius, Eusebius, Didymus Caecus, Ambrosiaster, Epiphanius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom and others fathers.

Even before Irenaeus, the forces of Montanism joined in battle with their opponents over the meaning of that text. They (and possibly other groups, such as the Marcionites, Manicheans and Gnostics) believed that they were the possessors of the “perfect” revelation, in the case of the Montanists, through the New Prophecy. The church believed that these groups twisted Paul’s meaning.

Among the Catholic faithful who are on record, including John of Damascus in the 8th century and beyond, only John Chrysostom took a different view of the passage. To be sure, he said, “See how now, at least, there is no prophecy nor gift of tongues.”[10] He took the position that 13:8 meant that tongues and prophecy would cease once the church was firmly established. Still, even he believes that 13:9-12 is eschatological.[11] Rogers takes the same view of 13:8, as do many dispensationalists; in antiquity that view was represented by the lone voice of Chrysostom. Rogers can interpret Paul’s prediction as he likes, but he might have mentioned that, apart from Montanism and other sects, his view was held by a minority of one in the first eight centuries of the church. He also fails to mention that Chrysostom’s contemporary, Ambrose, writing in Italy, suggests that one patristic authority might affirm the present reality of tongues and another deny them.

8. His elimination of all miraculous gifts, when he has only dealt with tongues
Although references to glossolalia are few in the church fathers, references to prophecy abound. Whether the Didache, Ignatius, Shepherd of Hermas, Barnabas and the Martyrdom of Polycarp, not to mention Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius and the anti-Montanists among others, all refer to the ongoing experience of charismatic prophecy. But Rogers does not seem fazed by that as he concludes that all the miraculous gifts had “died out.” (143)

Conclusion

The data up through around AD 250 indicate that some Christians claimed to themselves possess or to have seen people using the gift of tongues; there are few data to show how widespread it remained. Still, Irenaeus, who traveled widely (Gaul, Italy, Asia) and his contemporaries (“we”) had themselves been witnesses of the phenomenon as practiced by “many” and in "all kinds of languages," as he attests in AD 180. Tertullian states that the “interpretation of tongues” was present in his group; it was probably an ecstatic, Montanist version of the gift of 1 Corinthians. In the same century, Catholics prophesied; Montanists “ prophesied” using known language, but in a euphoria. Neither Catholic nor Montanist is on record as connecting Montanist prophecy with glossolalia. Finally, Origen remarks that the signs of the Spirit’s presence came after Jesus’ ascension; these signs –including prophecy and tongues – had diminished by the mid-200s, but were by no means extinct: “there are still traces of His presence.” The interval between Irenaeus and Origen is roughly 70 years, and their subjective impressions that earlier “many” had the gift and later the gifts had “diminished” are hard to measure scientifically. What is clear is that by the end of the 4th century, Chrysostom, who himself traveled between two great churches, had no first-hand experience with tongues (although perhaps Ambrose did), and his approach is the majority view from then onward.

NOTES:


[3] Quote from Hans Lietzmann, The Founding of the Church Universal (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950) 194. I am guessing that Lietzmann bases his opinion on Eusebius, who said that Montanus “began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying”. In fact, Eusebius does not say that Montanus first began to speak in tongues and then switched to prophecy: the experience was singular, that Montanus’ brand of prophesying was to babble distorted, but understandable words. Hence, it appears that Rogers misquotes Lietzmann, who in turn misunderstands Eusebius; then Rogers claims Eusebius as his source. NPNF 2,1 also
mistranslates the key verb in Eusebius with its “As also we hear *that* many brethren in the Church…”

[4] Italicized texts are our improvement on the ANF translation. We paraphrase the phrase that in ANF is “as he used *Himself* also to speak.” Irenaeus is referring to the apostle, who spoke in tongues, 1 Cor 14:18, not the capitalized “He”, which one supposes would have been a reference to the Spirit. Next we retranslate “and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages” as “and everywhere those who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages.”


[8] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.28.7, 9; 4.9.2; 5.7.2. We should mention that Irenaeus knew and used the so-called Long Ending of Mark, which he quotes in *Against Heresies* 3.10.5. This means that his Bible contained Jesus' promise that the disciples would "speak in new tongues" (Mark 16:17). Nevertheless, this datum is not proof that Irenaeus knew of tongues in his age, as are the other passages we have mentioned.

