

## Tongue Tied, Part 1

Scripture: Acts 2:6–11; Acts 10:46; Acts 19:6

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*The following is an excerpt from the preface of the Chinese edition of Charismatic Chaos. It explains the origins and early history of the charismatic movement. With the Strange Fire conference rapidly approaching, we believe it is appropriate to share this material with you. Part one is excerpted below; check back tomorrow for part two. —GTY Staff*

The charismatic movement began at the start of the twentieth century under the tutelage of Charles Fox Parham. He was an eccentric preacher of dubious moral character who was infatuated with fringe ideas, mysterious phenomena, and an aberrant theology known as Holiness doctrine. The story of Parham's quest for the gift of tongues is briefly told in chapter 1, but some background on Parham and the events that gave birth to the charismatic movement might be helpful as a way of introducing this new edition of *Charismatic Chaos* to Chinese readers.

In 1900, Mr. Parham founded Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas, specifically to train Holiness missionaries. He believed if his students could recover the Pentecostal gift of tongues, they would be able to take the gospel to all nations without any need to learn languages. He further became convinced that the gift of tongues was the only true sign of Holy Spirit baptism. Soon his fascination with speaking in tongues became an obsession. As the year 1900 drew to a close, Parham urged his students to spend several days in fasting and prayer, seeking the restoration of that apostolic gift.

On New Year's Day, January 1, 1901, one of Parham's students, Agnes Ozman, began uttering random syllables. Those who heard her concluded she was speaking Chinese (though none of them knew any Chinese dialect). For the rest of the day, she seemed unable to speak in English, and she wrote with a kind of stylized scribbling that Parham and his disciples judged to be Chinese. The students were convinced their prayers had been answered, and that what they were witnessing was the very same miraculous phenomenon described in Acts 2.

Within days, however, a sample of Miss Ozman's writing was published in a newspaper. It provides objective proof that Parham's claims were totally false. It is a scrap of paper covered with crude, indecipherable, artificial hieroglyphs that clearly have nothing in common with Chinese characters. In fact, like the random syllables she spoke, Miss Ozman's writing has none of the characteristics of any language at all.

Parham nevertheless insisted that Miss Ozman had spoken and written Chinese. In fact, Parham himself and at least thirty other students now claimed that they too had received the gift of tongues. In the face of careful scrutiny and hard questions, Parham defiantly enlarged his original fiction:

He announced that the students had spoken *many* languages. He himself had received the capability of preaching in German and Swedish, Agnes Ozman in "Chinese," and others in a variety of languages including Japanese, Hungarian, Syrian, Hindi, and Spanish. Parham noted that "cloven tongues of fire" appeared over the heads of speakers. Sometimes interpretations followed such as

“God is love,” “Jesus is mighty to save,” and “Jesus is ready to hear.” [1][Gary B. McGee, “The Revival Legacy of Charles F. Parham,” *Enrichment Journal* (Summer 1999)]

Parham zealously advertised the phenomenon, insisting it was a momentous breakthrough in missionary strategy. At least six months after numerous language experts had stated that Agnes Ozman’s scribbles bore no likeness whatsoever to Chinese writing, Parham was still feeding newspaper reporters his own highly embellished version of events. A typical report from that time cited his very words:

We are expecting thousands of ministers, evangelists and other people from all parts of the United States who desire to become missionaries to attend. There is no doubt that at this time they will have conferred on them the “gift of tongues,” if they are worthy and seek it in faith, believing they will thus be made able to talk to the people whom they choose to work among in their own language, which will, of course, be an inestimable advantage.

The students of Bethel College do not need to study in the old way to learn the languages. They have them conferred on them miraculously. *Different ones have already been able to converse with Spaniards, Italians, Bohemians, Hungarians, Germans, and French in their own language.* I have no doubt various dialects of the people of India and even the language of the savages of Africa will be received during our meeting in the same way. I expect this gathering to be the greatest since the days of Pentecost. [2](“New Kind of Missionaries: Envoys to the Heathen Should Have Gift of Tongues,” *Hawaiian Gazette*, May 31, 1901, 10)

Parham was lying, of course. But his students naively accepted his assurance that the sounds they were uttering were legitimate foreign languages. Their teacher had admonished them not to entertain any doubts or put their “gift” to the test. Therefore over the next decade, several teams of missionaries under Parham’s influence went overseas expecting to be able to preach and converse in languages they had never studied.

The failure of the Pentecostal missionary strategy was immediate and spectacular. An article published in 1909 described the fiasco in these words:

Missionary S. C. Todd, of the Bible Missionary Society, has made investigations personally in three mission fields and among four groups of well-meaning but deluded people who have gone from this country to Japan, to China, and to India expecting to preach to the natives of those countries in their own tongue; but in no single instance have been able to do so. They have needed an interpreter in even the commonest affairs of life.

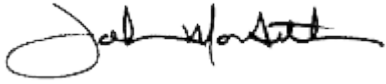
Some of them are in absolute destitution and are dependent on their Christian brethren there for the necessities of life and are as helpless as babes. In some cases they are in danger of losing all faith in the supernatural in religion and drifting into infidelity and sin. [3][A. E. Seddon, “Edward Irving and Unknown Tongues,” *The Homiletic Review* (New York; Funk and Wagnalls, 1909), 109]

Failure and scandal seemed to sully everything Parham touched. Less than a year after its founding, Bethel Bible College in Topeka closed permanently. Five years later, newspapers across the country reported that some of Parham’s followers in Illinois had beaten an invalid woman to death in an effort to drive the demon of rheumatism from her body. Before the shock of that story subsided, Parham was arrested in San Antonio, Texas, and charged with sodomy. He wrote a confession in order to

obtain his release but later recanted his own admission of guilt.

He had discredited himself in every conceivable sense. His reputation never fully recovered from the scandals.

But Parham was relentless, and he always seemed to be able to attract willing disciples. When he died in 1929, more than 2,500 followers attended his funeral, even though it was held in a remote Kansas town during a fierce blizzard.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John W. Parham". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

*(Please return for part two tomorrow.)*

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