

Speaking in Tongues: A Gift of the Holy Spirit

Marylee Mitcham

Let it be fulfilled upon them, as upon those on the day of Pentecost; let the gift of tongues be poured out upon thy people, even cloven tongues as of fire, and the interpretation thereof. (D&C 109:36)

TONGUES OF FIRE. All attentive persons within traditions that accept the New Testament are at least familiar with the phrase. Certainly I remember it from childhood when I celebrated the Feast of Pentecost as an Episcopalian, although I cannot recall any personal meaning it held for me. But later, as a Catholic, I realized through my own experience that this ancient spiritual gift is still bestowed. And now, as a Mormon, I can easily identify with pioneer accounts of its appearance among Saints who so richly received revelations and manifestations of the Spirit.

I became a Mormon in 1989, but it was in the early '80s that I first read about the Saints' Pentecostal experiences at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, and I felt tremendously empathetic. For one thing, I had ancestors there—I come from a strayed line of Mormons. I also felt how "right" it was for Joseph to have prayed for a special anointing when he said, "Let it be fulfilled upon them as in the days of Pentecost." As a Cath-

MARYLEE MITCHAM descends from several lines of nineteenth-century Mormon pioneers but converted from Catholicism only fifteen years ago. She is the author of *An Accidental Monk: Her Domestic Search for God* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1976), and is at work on *Which to Prefer*, a book of personal essays. A wife, mother, grandmother, retired psychiatric R.N., and licensed acupuncturist, she now has a home on old mining camp lands in Huerfano County, Colorado.

olic, I was familiar with Pope John XXIII's similar prayer in the late '60s. And in both cases, those prayers were abundantly answered. Even as a Catholic, I knew Joseph Smith was a prophet, and it did not occur to me to question his authority to call down such blessings. I also did not question it in a different prophet, one who was particularly revered within the Catholic Church.

Later on, I read that Brigham Young was comfortable speaking in tongues and did so at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. It pleased me to think that a prophet with such good common sense was also able to receive gifts and consolations of a charismatic nature. These facts from Christian history, Mormon and Catholic, seemed to me to be all of a piece, since I knew there was only one Holy Spirit who, like the wind, blew in all directions.

The New Testament at my hand as I write is the one that most inspires and speaks to me, the Revised Standard Version/Catholic Edition, translated from the Greek and "set forth," as it states, in A.D. 1611. That's nine years before the *Mayflower* set sail. It was last revised in 1946, a year after World War II and sixteen years before Vatican II.

I've always found the Acts of the Apostles fascinating in its account of how it was in those earliest of days when Peter was leading a small band of about 120 believers (Acts 1:15). Such a small church they were, waiting in Jerusalem as "charged" by Jesus until they received the gift promised by the Father, which the risen Lord described as being baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5).

When the apostles questioned Jesus about this gift—was it a restoration of the Kingdom of Israel?—he in effect told them to mind their own business, not His. Theirs was to receive power when the Holy Ghost came upon them. Then, he said, "and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:6-9).

As I interpret it, the gift of the Holy Spirit as Jesus described it to them would change both their *being* by endowing them with power and their *doing* in consequence of witnessing to the end of the earth. Their inner and outer lives would be transformed by this gift, which was a second baptism distinct from John's baptism with water (Acts 1:4-5).

One might think that, after Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection, his apostles had no need of a second baptism. Moving between the temple and the upper room, they were already with one accord devoting themselves to prayer "together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus,

and with his brethren” (Acts 1:12–14). They were thoroughly consecrated to the sacred purposes of Jesus Christ and had been through enormous “correlation” as a group already. Yet a feast was being prepared for them, for their children and for “all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:39).

The promise was fulfilled before many days, just as Jesus said, and in a way—the Bible says—that perplexed and amazed (Acts 2:12); in one day, three thousand people shared in the bounty by joining with the Church through repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. They also received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) after which they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers. They were now a Spirit-filled people, praising God with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2:46–47).

What did it look like, this promise so often described as “poured out”? It appears to have been something both seen and heard. Tongues as of fire apparently flickered downward and rested on each one of them, and they heard a sound like the rush of a mighty wind, not to mention the audible “tongues” to which the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1–4).

This experience had to have been an enormously powerful, private and public event, with the public power being a sort of cumulative thing, oddly (or not so oddly) democratic. It may have come down from on high, but not as edicts do. All who participated knew for themselves and gave utterance to “the mighty works of God” in testimony that all understood, bewildering as this unique form of translation into the listeners’ native language was (Acts 2:5–11).

My sense is that there was not a loud babble of many languages at once in which an Egyptian bystander, say, had to be positioned next to a Galilean who was providentially given whatever spoken form the Egyptian language was. No, I suspect that all Galileans who gave utterance to the Spirit were given something new—like the tongue of angels—a tongue in which all listeners could find meaning, perhaps through equivalently inspired listening. It really wasn’t about language itself as much as about understanding—and transparent, prophetic, Spirit-filled worship while the nascent Church gratefully assimilated its newly given power, person by person.

No doubt both bystanders and participants were amazed. I’m not at all surprised that “fear came upon every soul” (Acts 2:43). To me this is a

substantiating detail. When one finds oneself suddenly and inexplicably endowed with a spiritual gift, there can be more fear of God than ever before, or even fear for the first time.

These early Christians were truly facing the unknown. We might say they were pioneers; and in this RSV translation particularly, they come alive for me as my spiritual ancestors, those without whom I cannot imagine being me.

However it happened, I know it was a strangely beautiful and orderly event—not because anyone *willed* it to be orderly, but because such a good gift couldn't have so successfully transferred power to the new Church without order of a celestial magnitude.

Pentecost was and is a wonderful feast for the Jews: the Feast of Weeks, seven weeks after Passover, even before God magnified its meaning as a Christian feast for those who were “cut to the heart” and came forward to save themselves from that “crooked generation” as Peter exhorted (Acts 2:40).

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In 1972 Carl, our four children, and I were living rustically in Nelson County, Kentucky, on 102 acres of hilly land loaned to us for the purpose of founding an intentional community. It was on that Sunday of Pentecost when the Families of St. Benedict, or FSB, was officially dedicated during an outdoor Mass.

We described ourselves this way: “As an ideal—a small group of Catholic husbands, wives, and their children brought together by Divine Providence in pursuit of a liturgical and contemplative life appropriate to families living in community.” Or less grandly—“a small group of married Catholics (along, perhaps, with some who are single) struggling individually and together to deepen their spiritual lives and become more aware of the presence of God—in themselves, in others, and in the natural world around them.”

Primitive Benedictine monasticism had our attention in a big way, and we sought to discover if there were ways it might filter down to inform family life. We had found mentors in monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Cistercian monastery six miles from our rural homestead.

Many aspects of the monastic calling spoke to our needs and interests, and we lived them rigorously for a full ten years before, essentially, giving up and moving on: community, service, solitude, silent prayer, li-

turgical prayer, poverty, obedience, fasting, manual labor. We tried to do what the monks did in preferring nothing to the love of Christ. In other words, we took a serious look at human nature and divine love with the hope of becoming more worthy of calling ourselves Christians.

At the material level we simplified, living without running water or electricity for the better part of those years. We planted gardens and kept a cow and goats for milk, chickens for eggs, bees for honey. We had what was called spiritual direction at the Abbey every week, and weekly community meetings at our house. We discussed everything in hope of a loving consensus which seldom materialized. Our children attended Catholic schools nearby and seemed to thrive. In many ways it was a rich and beautiful life. And the reading was wonderful—so many fine classics on seeking a relationship with God!

That's a long story. But it was here in this small community that baptism in the Holy Spirit came to my serious attention. It was in those years, 1972–82, that we put ourselves and others through the mill of self-purification and were ground—as the adage goes—exceedingly fine. There were too many strained relationships, too many personal faults, too much fatigue. The relationship with my husband had many stresses in those years; we couldn't see eye to eye on what our goals were as an individual family or what we owed each other. The good news and the bad news of daily living were nearly indistinguishable as we struggled to speak the truth in love.

I had been deeply drawn to a life of contemplative prayer ever since our conversion to Catholicism in 1969 when I realized it was possible to have a relationship with God, a God who took it upon Himself to initiate Presence; He came to me in an ordinary way, but with extraordinary power.

At that time, Carl and I were both students at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and we were caught in a maelstrom beyond our studies: religious searchings and inner conversions, babies one after another, poverty, parents who were ill, and the FBI arresting Carl because he refused to participate in the military. It was the 1960s and our lives burst with meanings of one sort or another. Overall, we felt full of gratitude.

By the 1970s, when I was in my thirties and living a more seriously dedicated New Testament adventure near the monastery in Kentucky, I felt an even stronger need of the Holy Spirit. My imperfections and sufferings were coming home to me at the same time that my faith was rooting

itself more deeply. I had been operating on a kind of pride that said, No matter how bad it gets, I will be all right because I'm strong enough to suffer longer than everyone else. But that wasn't true. I began to realize I wasn't as strong as I thought. I had a breaking point. Each day brought the realization that I was safe in God no matter what. But getting from one day to the next and from hour to hour was the rub. I began to wonder if I should seek out this baptism in the Holy Spirit I'd been hearing about as part of the Catholic charismatic renewal movement.

As I understood it, Pope John XXIII had prayed for a "new" Pentecost within the American Church, and it had been miraculously poured out, along with the gift of tongues, in several universities in the late 1960s. It had emerged at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, then at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, then at Notre Dame in South Bend. Even many of the Cistercian monks were interested in its spread and potential for renewal, especially among the laity. It was not considered a threat within Catholicism, although many shied away from it because it was strange and still confined to college campuses.

We had married friends who had left the Catholic Church to become Mennonites. They lived in Louisville and knew a prominent black woman called Earth Mother who had a ministry to street kids. She was active in a charismatic Baptist church in Louisville where, our friends said, speaking in tongues flourished. They had been prayed over by her—she laid hands on them for the baptism of the Holy Spirit—and they had, indeed, received the gift of tongues and other blessings as well. Their testimony along with my personal knowledge of them left me open to the possibility.

Yet I was afraid. It all sounded too good to be true, a little too extravagant for someone like me. I now considered myself to be "a wife, a mother, a friend to some, and an accidental monk," the title I'd used for my first attempt to record my domestic search for God. The monastic life which I was living at home was deeply satisfying in many ways. Its aesthetics fit my personality. Earth Mother? The Baptist Church? No, I wanted strong, solid monk-like practices like chanting the office three times a day.

I saw my path as a kind of renunciation, a stripping for spiritual combat, a testing in the desert sort of thing. But in my need, I finally said to God in prayer, show me the way if there is more of the Spirit to be had. Then I began to ask for a private Pentecostal outpouring when I drove alone in the car. I opened my mouth and tried to let the Spirit give me ut-

terance. But it was utterly impossible (pun intended). I'm so glad that no other person heard me trying to "learn" tongues on my own. I came to the conclusion that, whatever else was possible, it wasn't, even though God seemed very close. I had to laugh at myself. I was so audacious, so needy that I wanted everything that's good, and I wanted it now, before I had a nervous breakdown. It really wasn't funny.

Around this time, with all four kids in grade school and junior high fulltime, and my husband willing to provide the respite care he knew I needed, I went for a weeklong retreat to an abbey of Cistercian nuns in Dubuque, Iowa. My roommate turned out to be a Little Sister of Jesus from Chicago. Everything about her seemed authentic and holy, so I asked her opinion of the charismatic movement. She said she thought it was wonderful. She herself did not have the gift of tongues nor feel the need for it, but she was happy to think of that spiritual gift being given to others. She strongly assuaged my fears of entrusting my soul to charismatic ministrations.

I still couldn't take the initiative; but I decided that, if the door opened in front of me, I'd walk through. Very shortly after I returned from my retreat, one of our Mennonite friends surprised me with a call inviting us—nearly a year after the first invitation—to the Baptist Church where Earth Mother was a minister. Carl declined, but I accepted.

Although I was very nervous and uptight, I was determined to explore this thing for better or worse. It was a large church with a lively congregation that seemed pretty mainstream to me. As we sang and moved through the service, I didn't feel particularly engaged, perhaps because I knew there would soon be an altar call to which I would respond with all my heart. Also, there was no chance of my being caught up in any sort of exaggerated mood, not while my knees were shaking and my hands were sweating like this. A part of me I didn't fully trust kept saying, "Leave while you're ahead," but I stayed, determined to see it through. I think, deep down, I did doubt that God would give me a gift in public that He wouldn't give me in private. I underestimated His desire to bless us through each other, to open our minds and hearts, to surprise us.

When the altar call came, I was mercifully led to a quiet place away from all eyes. There Earth Mother, my friend, and another man asked me to kneel, and they placed their hands on my head. Earth Mother said a simple and lovely prayer asking the Lord to help me come into a deeper fullness of the Spirit. It wasn't a long prayer. I wish I could remember the

words. Mostly, I can remember only that I approved of them. I remember, however, that Earth Mother expressly called it a baptism in the Spirit and asked the Lord to give me the gift of tongues.

No way, I heard myself thinking, I've tried that. And then they were waiting for me to open my mouth and use a new language to praise the Lord. Very faintly I could hear their tongues, but the syllables were beyond my grasp and I cannot say I understood their language. I simply trusted it.

I told them, "That's not how I pray." Earth Mother asked me to tell her what words I would use. "I say, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." She asked me to begin saying, "Alleluia." I could do that. Then I heard myself receiving the gift of tongues, beginning to say new and different things, a kind of human birdsong that *did* sound like language sounds.

I could not believe it. One thing was certain. It had not been within my power a few moments earlier. But now I had this gift; it seemed so simple. And I also had an interpretation that came to me privately at the same time, something like a faint melody behind the expressed lilt of tongues: "in order that you might know your sins are forgiven." It was truly amazing. I wasn't even perplexed, but I did and still do find the experience strange. The ability has stayed with me, but now I don't use it other than in private devotion because I don't find myself where it is practiced. I don't think it has died out in the Catholic Church, but I sense it has died down as it did for the Mormon pioneers. For myself, I use it only when the Spirit moves me, usually one on one, or alone when words fail me.

What is my point here? Primarily to offer a personal testimony. To give that testimony in my Latter-day Saint ward would create confusion, discomfort, and a disorder of at least a mild sort. They don't need that and neither do I! Perhaps for the ward I could choose something of a higher nature, because what we are talking about here is not a gift of the highest order. It's possible to have it and still be deficient in love. But that's how testimony is—certain things come to one rather than others, and we take a chance saying them out loud because our impulse seems to come from that certain place that says to speak. It's a tricky thing. I remember testifying as a member of an Evangelical youth group called Young Life in the seventh grade. A lot was coming through me that I know was real, yet at the same time I was arrogantly telling my mother she wasn't a *real* Christian, hurting her deeply.

My husband Carl is still a Catholic, and our relationship has been

difficult. But we've made it work. Just last week I asked him to tell me one thing he liked about the Latter-day Saints, and one thing he didn't.

"I like that Mormons seriously try to be good," he said. "But I don't like that there isn't more recognition of the ambiguities inherent in understanding the diversities and subtleties of the human soul attempting to embody goodness." I agree. His answer points me toward a need for that honest inquiry that some generous Mormon forums encourage. And I am also reminded of my young bishop who, while not a philosopher, is learning to discern goodness however it shows up or doesn't. He lives the ambiguities.

So this is part of my testimony. I am a Mormon because of the "more" we say we have, yet there is also a "less" which I cannot help but recognize. Our Church is very busy and social. In a word, it is an extroverted place. One thing we lack is an ongoing contemplative tradition, a graduate school of prayer if you will, or meditation, such as the Catholics have in the contemplative orders. But let that pass.

I choose to be Mormon because, finally, I know that love covers a multitude of sins. It is among the brothers and sisters in the wards I have belonged to that I have learned the most about love and have been most often the recipient of love. Every bishop and Relief Society president I've had has been a gift to me. And I am profoundly in debt to their struggling discipleship in roles handed down to them through Joseph Smith but by Jesus Christ Himself.

As I say, I regard my ability to speak in tongues as a minor gift. A greater gift is my capacity to recognize the voice of the Lord in the love I have found among the Latter-day Saints. Nonetheless, I have derived much personal comfort and encouragement from my gift of tongues. Recently in some old notes, I came across the information that it was only after I had received the gift that I knew for sure I had a testimony of Jesus Christ. Before that, I was only a God-oriented person. If it were only for that, I would regard it as no mean thing to have received a gift for speaking in tongues.

In this Church, so full of truth and life, we all have a role. I remind myself that some of those roles are better defined than others—like the one you see me in now. What is it I am doing here? I hope it is a form of Christian service. But again, let that pass. It is what it is. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.