

THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD
A LINGUIST LOOKS AT THE MYSTERY OF TONGUES

By Del Tarr
Access Group Publishers, 2010 (447 pages)

Book Review

Chapter Synopsis

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Tarr's book is only for the serious reader. His vocabulary and skills with the written word are just as complex as the subject itself. The salvation of Tarr's material is the systematic way he helps the reader think using a wide and inclusive framework of reference. Historically, philosophically, personally and most of all theologically, Tarr takes the reader through an authentic journey in the phenomena of speaking in tongues. Throughout the book he is unafraid of including the voice of critics, cynics and opposition. By definition, Tarr is a fresh voice among Pentecostals who rarely consider a full circumference of voices on the subject of speaking in tongues. This approach even includes the comparison of speaking in tongues and the schizophrenic.

Through nine chapters and three sections of appendix Tarr brings out research that will undoubtedly find its way to the world of academia as an intelligent, authentic and comprehensive reference. It is important to understand from the outset that this is not a book on *how to be baptized in the Holy Spirit* or *the gift of the Holy Spirit to speak in tongues*. It is vital that the reader understands Tarr's material as research for the thinking mind, not to question God or the Scriptures, but to conclude with the revivalist hymn of the 1890's 'Let the Holy Ghost come in!' Any other approach will leave the reader frustrated. Tarr's material will take the reader deeper into the subject. The title itself needs to be understood correctly. Tarr is not accusing God of being foolish, but utterly unreasonable that we mere human being should be graced with the beauty and wonder of speaking in tongues.

Square one: Tarr poses the question that we should explore how God directed the events of the first century and the people God worked through. He states that our own intelligence is a means of *not seeing* God. Not that we are dull or sharp in

mind but sinful. He affirms the reason for writing the book as “not for the professional in either theology or the social sciences.” This first chapter will shock the reader by consistently saying that glossolalia [speaking in tongues] is irrational by design and by running parallels like *the use of tongues as related to human speak*. He challenges *initial evidence*, again, as research not a point of opposition. He states that the book seeks to answer the question: “Does the God of the Christian Bible know all about man’s struggle with this issue [rational and irrational], and has chosen glossolalia on purpose for that very reason?” Most of the first chapter continues along these lines setting the reader up for further investigation.

What critics say: Tarr suggests that historical data on this subject is largely negative as most records are through the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, Tarr wonderfully looks outside of normative history and begins to unpack a wide range of voices in this chapter. It will make the traditional Pentecostal angry for even considering *other* voices. For instance, Campbell Morgan calls speaking in tongues the *vomit of Satan*. Tarr continues his parallelism with speaking in tongues and satanic behavior, psychology, schizophrenia and racism. But Tarr continues in this chapter to critique and evaluate the critics openly – a wonderful approach! He turns over stones of fatalism, falsism, labelism and flat out heresy in the endeavour to embrace, but not agree with other voices.

History of early beliefs and writing on tongues: This is where Tarr would make more sense to the traditional Pentecostal tracking the history of glossolalia. It will challenge the Pentecostal to look, comprehend and acknowledge the work of the

Holy Spirit outside Azuza Street and Topeka Kansas. Again, this ties into the title of his book as the *foolishness of God* did not just look irrational in the choosing of twelve unschooled disciples but the continuing history of personalities God used. Tarr believes this reveals (in part) the personality of the Holy Spirit. He does not hold back on the individual thoughts, doubts, beliefs, joys and challenges of those personalities. The reader may find a personal challenge that our culture and time in history does not have all the answers. Two commonalities are seen in this historical research. Firstly, that the believer is surprised by glossolalia. Secondly, no one had yet managed to produce a comprehensive, exhaustive and complete theology on this subject, hence, the foolishness of God. From Greek Orthodox, Catholicism, Early Church Fathers, Reformers and Protestants, Tarr looks at all their experiences of speaking in tongues and comes back to the lens he is looking through – a linguist. An impressive quote from a Christian in Amsterdam is “Oh, I can’t rule my own tongue.” The reader will be impressed by the context of this statement.

Communications theory and glossolalia: Tarr’s fourth chapter begins with a basic statement that 2000 years ago communication was face to face. But in our time of history communication is instant and global. Throughout the chapter he unpacks these two obvious points in technological history. There is no other time that *words* are used to talk about *words* [another parallelism Tarr uses with glossolalia]. The haunting aspect of this is that speaking in tongues has not improved or declined in quality. The history of communication has taken leaps forward but not glossolalia. It simply *is*. The explosion of *communication* and the

resource to *understand* [knowledge] is global but glossolalia has always been global, at least in principle [where the church existed]. Tarr explores the construct of a sentence and how it is translated as a linguist paralleled, again, with glossolalia. He ties this with the three basic cognitive approaches to *understanding* in *conceptual, concrete-relational and physical/institutional*. Once again, Tarr is looking outside the normal parameter for this subject. He asks the question [albeit indirect] how our cognitive understanding that includes emotions, feelings and attitudes, affect glossolalia, if at all. He challenges our concept of *literacy* today as something different from ancient times. Therefore, we have an ambiguous approach to *understanding* that includes our own definition of literacy that was not known, or different, in the history of glossolalia. Is literacy *textual* or *oral*? In ancient times it was oral but now it is textual. How does this affect, if at all, glossolalia in a language we did not learn or even comprehend it itself?

The case for tongues in the Bible: This chapter will delight the traditional Pentecostal as Tarr broaches the subjects of glossolalia being a *sign*. He also explores tongues in *prayer* and *intercession* strengthening the believer's faith as power to *witness*. To the delight of the charismatic's he even broaches *singing in the Spirit*. But like the former chapters, Tarr steps outside the normative and approaches power to *suffer in joy*, to be *pure* without being *self-righteous*, to be a *servant* and most of all *unpopular*. Tarr moves around history and philosophy unpacking the word *power* within a Biblical context of glossolalia. He concludes the chapter by asking the question "where did tongues get lost in history" setting the reader up for the next chapter.

The role of testimonies: Unlike a judicial testimony to convict the apprehended this chapter works the other way. Through well documented outside the normative testimonies there is a commonality of being *arrested* by the Holy Spirit that creates the testimony. From Episcopalians to Lutherans, and more, Tarr cites the testimonies of people from across the globe that has experienced glossolalia and the empowerment the Spirit brings to change life-goals. If the definition of literacy is textual then a testimony may not carry the weight of something written down. But that's the point of a testimony – to speak in one's own language clearly about the love of God and to speak in tongues as a result of His apparent *foolishness* [allowing us to experience Him] actually carries more weight. But first, one must be apprehended by the Spirit. Quoting Charles Finney he described the Holy Spirit as waves of love washing over him. But the next testimony was different in text but the same in empowerment.

Risk taking/loss-God's model – The risk God takes with humanity: The statement Tarr makes in this chapter sets the reader up for conflict and controversy. "Jesus didn't leave us without a sign – but he hid in something so intellectually ugly and risky that many would reject it and justify that decision in pride." Wow! This is where Tarr challenges the literalist, that God will take risks and expect us to join him, therefore, God is not reasonable in our own ambiguous self. He expounds this principle in the lives of Old testament characters like Abraham, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, David and Ruth culminating with Jesus Messiah. The ministry of Jesus was unexpected and unpredictable especially when talking about His Father's Kingdom. Tarr broaches the culturally difficult and dangerous

subject of Islam and Christianity colliding in Jesus but makes it clear that *incarnation* made all the difference – the unreasonable risk that God took.

Therefore, if all that God has done appears to be irrational, why would we rationalize all that He is? Regarding communication with God, Tarr offers two models called ‘slave’ and ‘friend’ suggesting the slave model is still practiced by the Church of priests and pastors. The premise: you can have access to God but only through me [priest or pastor]. Through a simple Biblical example of the woman who broke the alabaster jar, Tarr continues to unpack taking a risk / loss wrapped up in the gift of *redemption*.

Thesis – no short cuts: Throughout this chapter Tarr challenges the idea of human intellect. Once more he parallels a number of opposites like *strength* and *weakness* with *self* and *selfless* using Jesus as the primary example who emptied himself. Tarr suggests that to experience the Holy Spirit in a deeper way, one must strip away all ego. Through this chapter Tarr suggests an *upside down* worldview, but in God’s eyes we are the one’s upside down as a divergence from the typical roots of philosophy. Once more, Tarr uses a wide range of reference to contrast his thoughts bringing the reader to a place of *thinking for themselves*. If the reader is not familiar with Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, Tarr introduces their worldview as an introduction into Western Greco-Roman thought. But he continues to say that man is capable of *transcending his own nature* because he was created to apprehend God. Bringing this into the context of Jesus Redeemer and His baptism of the Holy Spirit, the reader will once again be guided to the thought that this affects our *speech* quoting Jesus that “out of the abundance of the

heart the mouth speaketh.” Glossolalia is therefore a proclamation of the community of the Spirit. In one sense, the Spirit *breaks into our lives* and leads us to surrender to a new worldview, philosophy of life and communication of the Kingdom that has come, and is yet to come – hence, no short cuts.

Intention of the Holy Spirit – Unity in the Body: In this concluding chapter Tarr embraces *reconciliation* as part of the Pentecostal experience. Quoting William Seymour “the blood has washed away the color line” Tarr is not afraid to broach the parallel of justice / reconciliation and unity / social justice. Using a number of LaPoorta quotes Tarr asks the question if we have underestimated the Spirit’s power for unity, and how does glossolalia play into this? He implies that speaking in tongues represents a broken speech for the broken Body of Christ until He comes again. How can one experience glossolalia and ignore the racist, sexist, and divided community of people? Therefore, the Spirit *must* bring a strong sense of unity to the divided. Exploring various aspects of unity Tarr unpacks this with people of differing opinions, scholarship, the poor, repentance and the ecumenical witness. He guides the reader to the priestly prayer of Jesus in John chapter seventeen.

Summary

Tarr’s thorough exploration of glossolalia will enrich the believer’s understanding of the *foolishness of God* and inspire the curious about Christianity and the transcendent ways in which God chooses to reveal his work to humanity. The reader will be surprised with the linguist thread of captured throughout the book with the development of human communication and the non-development of glossolalia (the baptism of the Holy Spirit

and ability to speak in tongues is not developed like human communication) – hence the *foolishness of God*.