

Our Theological Biases

Here is an interesting thing I once ran across in Matthew Henry's fine, fine commentary. Despite the otherwise wonderful scholarship of Henry's commentary, this is one of the most obvious examples of theological biases I've found. It occurs in the section of the Pentateuch that deals with slaves being set free. This particular matter is addressed by Moses in Exodus, during the initial giving of the Law, and then again in Deuteronomy, a second giving of the law (the actual meaning of the word Deuteronomy), immediately before Moses goes off the scene and Joshua leads the Children of Israel into the Promised Land. A brief explanation of how slaves/servants were to be treated is necessary here. Slaves, Hebrew slaves (Hebrew, ebed) were to be set free every Seventh/Sabbath year, and/or in the 50th year, the Year of Jubilee.

Moses commands that when a servant or slave is set free, whether in the *sabbath* year or in the Year of Jubilee, that slave would decide whether or not to leave his master. Moses records, *“But if the servant plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out free’”* Ex 21:5.

A fuller understanding of this includes the reality that in that culture, if the husband came into this situation married, then he would be allowed to leave in the sabbath year with his wife and family. However, if the master had given him his wife, then when the man *“goes out free”* the wife and children would still belong to the master; the wife having been given to the slave, by the master. Therefore, if the servant went out free, he would have to leave his wife and children with the master's household. If on the other hand, the master was good to him, and the servant loved the master, he could choose to stay with his master, and thereby with his wife and children. When this was the case, the master would bring the servant before the judges, so that all would know that the servant was staying voluntarily. Then the master would take an awl, bring the servant to the doorpost and thrust the awl through the servant's ear and into the doorpost, thus leaving the *“earmark”* of voluntary, continued servitude to that master. It is obvious from the passage that the decision to stay was based upon the servant's appreciation of his treatment by the master. Naturally, it is possible that the servant may just have wanted to retain the society of his immediate family, but let's not ethnocentrize and read our culture's ethics into that culture. When survival was at stake, sentiment often had to take the backseat. Our culture's relative ease of survival and its inordinate focus on sentiment might have us thinking otherwise, but let's don't. Matthew Henry on the other hand, having lived during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, had a very different view of the issue of liberty than you and I might. In teaching on the law of the earmark, Henry says, *“By this law God taught, (1.) The Hebrew servants generosity, and a noble love of liberty, for they were the Lord's freemen; a mark of disgrace must be put upon him who refused liberty when he might have it, though he refused it upon considerations otherwise laudable enough. Thus Christians, being bought with a price, and called unto liberty, must not be the servants of men, nor of the lusts of men. There is a free and princely spirit that much helps to uphold a Christian. He likewise taught, (2.) The Hebrew masters not to trample upon their poor servants, knowing, not only that they had been by birth upon a level with them, but that, in*

a few years, they would be so again. Thus Christian masters must look with respect on believing servants.”

Now you and I might wonder from section (1.), why Henry didn't see – as we often do – the loving master as representing God/Jesus, and the willingness of the servant to stay as representing the Christian remaining in appreciative service to his loving Master, God/Jesus. But he did not. Rather, he saw that *not* taking liberty when it was offered, was a disgrace, which required a disgraceful, physical mark! Now without going too deeply into what was going on in Henry's British Isles and that nation's relation to the “New World” and the slave trades, let it suffice to say that Henry's biases (ethnocentrism) were rather obvious. His theologies, naturally informed by his world, his surroundings, his upbringing, his political leanings, his education, his personal experiences, etc, etc, etc, led him to his understanding of this section of Scripture. But just to make the cheese more binding, let's see how Henry understands the “second telling” of these laws of the earmark, which appears in Deuteronomy chapter 15. This chapter reiterates the treatment of servants and their release in the *sabbath* years, and/or their desire to stay regardless of the fact that it is a *sabbath* year. As the two passages deal with the same matter, they have similarities and differences. The Deuteronomy telling is more specific about mercy being shown to the “outgoing” servant who decides to leave. The Israelites are reminded that they too had been servants whom were “led out” and therefore ought to have mercy upon the “outgoing servant”, giving him ample provision upon the occasion of his leaving. The Exodus telling spoke more of provision made for an outgoing *female* servant (Ex 21:7-11), while the Deuteronomy telling specifies what is to be done more for the outgoing *male* servant (Deut 15:7-11). Much as the Exodus passage tells of what is to be done to the servant who wants to *stay* with his master. Regarding that *staying*, the Deuteronomy passage speaks thus... “*And if it happens that he says to you, 'I will not go away from you,' because he loves you and your house, since he prospers with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your female servant you shall do likewise.*” (Deut 15:16, 17)

Interestingly, Brother Henry's theological biases restrict him from seeing the ending sentence of verse 17, “*Also to your female servant you shall do likewise*”, altogether! Rather than seeing that the same (*likewise*) is to be done for the male and the female in regards to their *staying* as the verse indicates, Henry overtly contradicts the verse and says that the “... *do likewise*” is that which is to be done for them in their *going*! Therefore with regards to their *going* Henry says, “*The maid-servants, though they were not to have their ears bored if they were disposed to stay, yet, if they went out free, they were to have a gratuity given them; for to this those words refer, Unto thy maid-servant thou shalt do likewise, Deut 15:17.*” We must ask ourselves why, when the verses in Deuteronomy address the female servant's *staying*, Henry makes patently contradictory statements of interpretation, saying that Moses' remarks concern their *going*. Somehow, Matthew Henry's theology (again, informed by his life's circumstances and education) forced the Scripture to say what it does not say. In the Exodus rendering, there could legitimately be different interpretations regarding the “heart” of the servant and his motivations for staying –

though I think calling it a “*disgrace*” unbiblical, but not un-political given the late 17th, early 18th century timing of the comments – but the Deuteronomy rendering requires an *a-priori* theological assumption in order to come to an understanding that flat denies what the verses say, plainly. Moses says “*do likewise*” regarding the awl and the doorpost and the *staying*, while Henry says that the “*do likewise*” regards the female *leaving*. Never to put my scholarship above Matthew Henry's, I find no place in Scripture, nor in my research, forbidding the piercing of the woman servant's ear, as stated in Duet 15:17.

There are some *extra-biblical*, Rabbinic sources that say that the master need *never* free the female slave, unless an injustice has been done, but there is no such Biblical provision. Presumably, if an injustice has been done and the female slave thus gains her freedom, there'd be no reason to say anything on the order of, “I love my master and wish to stay”. But let's say that the injustice was that the master had promised the female slave to his son as wife, and the son refused to marry her (Ex 21:9), she may wish to remain in the master's house; and the master may then indicate that in the same manner as is indicated for the male servant - “...*then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your female servant you shall do likewise.*” (Duet 15:17).

Even if one were to assume that Ex 21:7, “*And if a man sells his daughter to be a female slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do*”, means (as Henry seems to indicate) that female slaves need never be released, merely reading further in the same chapter contradicts this assumption. Verses 26 and 27 provide for the release of male *or* female servant upon the occasion of injury. But if either the male or the female wished to stay... what would happen? Correct... the judges and the awl and the doorpost...

Indeed, any number of scenarios could be imagined, in which the female servant was desirous of staying, even when due to sabbath year, or Jubilee, or broken promise, or injury, she could go free.

Whatever theological biases were in Brother Henry's mind, showed up in his fine commentary.

With that in mind, let's turn our attention to a Sunday School class in which I sat recently. The class was discussing the events of the Day of Pentecost. Without exegeting the entire passage here (a quick reading of Acts 1:12-2:13 would be helpful before continuing), let me say that it was clear that certain *a-priori* theological assumptions were in place as the passage was approached. The most obvious underlying assumption present, though perhaps not even realized by the teacher, was a cessationist paradigm. As a matter of fact, it is not unusual for some who teach, to have learned their theology from the cessationist paradigm, even if they themselves claim not to hold that opinion, themselves! Cessationism, which asserts that the New Testament's “sign gifts” (among others) ceased, either at the end of the “apostolic age”, or upon the completion of the present Canon of Scripture, has been “baked” into numerous commentaries and theological paradigms in the same way that baking powder is baked into most baked goods. You can neither see nor taste baking powder in finished baked goods, but its presence is essential to the outcome.

The issues in Henry's treatment of the Exodus and Deuteronomy passages were (1) the earmark for the servant if staying, and (2) provision for the servant if leaving. The issues we will address in the “Day of Pentecost” passage are also two: (1) how many people were there having tongues

of fire appearing and sitting upon each of them and then speaking in tongues (*glossais*), and (2) whether or not what they spoke as a result of the fire sitting on them (being filled with the Holy Spirit) were “known languages”.

In order for the cessationist paradigm and its associated theologies to work, the number of people being filled with the Holy Spirit *must be* the entire 120 listed in Acts 1:15 (the assumption of the Sunday school teacher), and the languages (tongues) spoken in Acts 2:4 *must be* known languages (the assumption of the Sunday school teacher) in order for the hearers to be able to understand what was being spoken. Interestingly, the Bible says neither of those things. Those things must be presumed, and then read into the Scriptures.

Presumably, the primary reason for those presumptions is that there are 16 *language groups* listed in the passage, as being the ones whom heard the *Galileans* (Acts 2:7) speaking in their own language; and those 16 groups listed may not have been an exhaustive listing. Naturally if you have at least 16 language groups hearing the message from Galileans in their own, known languages, then there must have been at least 16 people speaking each of the various languages “*as the Spirit gave them utterance*” (Acts 2:4). So the speaking in tongues must have been done by more than just the 12 Apostles.

Without even realizing it, that 120 number for the number of people receiving the filling of the Holy Spirit and speaking in “other tongues” (*heterais glossais*), is dependent upon a-priori theological assumptions, namely, cessationist assumptions that the tongues were known languages. But let's look a little more closely, not at the way in which we are to understand the passage in light of any a-priori theological assumptions, nor in any way designed to defend a body of doctrine, but just for what the passage actually says. First, to the number of people who received the first filling of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 1, verses 12-14, make it relatively clear that the Apostles had just returned from Bethany where the Ascension had taken place (Luke 24:50, 51), to Jerusalem where they then praised God in the Temple (Luke 24:52, 53). Presumably, Bethany being just a mile or two from Jerusalem, their return would have been on the same day, Acts 1:12.¹ With the Ascension being 40 days after the Resurrection (Acts 1:3), that means that there was still a week before the feast of “*Pentecost had fully come*”; Pentecost being 50 days after Passover. Verse 13 tells us that they were staying in an “*upper room*”.

In the Sunday school class, it was speculated that perhaps the room belonged to the relatively wealthy family of John Mark, because it was so large as to accommodate 120. Beginning to see where our a-priori assumptions can take us? Those who were in the upper room are those who'd just come from the site of the Ascension, Bethany, and were returning to where they'd been staying. Just as an aside, for these relatively poor men, not currently employed, living on the funds that had been donated to the ministry by the supporting women and others, fearing for their lives post-crucifixion, and pre-Spirit filling, to be living in an upper room that would hold 120 is not a very reasonable assumption. But be that as it may, what we see in verses 13 and 14 is that “*these all [who] continued with one accord in prayer and supplication*” were Jesus' close disciples – perhaps just the 11, maybe Justus and Matthias, and perhaps Jesus' close friends and

¹ The “*bound of the Sabbath*” or “*a sabbath day's journey*” was the distance that Jews were allowed to travel, legitimately, on the Sabbath; roughly 2000 cubits. This is not to say that their return was necessarily on a Sabbath, but the phrase, “*a Sabbath day's journey*”, is a measure of distance, utilizing something other than distance, to denote distance; much like the term “*light year*”, a unit of *distance* denoted in *time*.

family. Those listed in addition to the Apostles are the women (presumably the supporting women), Jesus' mother, and Jesus' brothers. But we are not even told whether or not they were all staying there, or if only the 11 were staying there. Indeed, the subject of the passage here is not all the disciples, but the 11. Luke is preparing Theophilus, and us, for the next topic, namely, the selection of the 12th, “replacement” Apostle.

Toward this end, verse 15 then naturally makes a bit of a shift, referring obviously to the days between the Ascension and Pentecost by saying, “*in those days*”. “What days?”, one might legitimately ask. Why the days between the Ascension and Pentecost of course, are the days to which Luke is referring.

Apparently, the disciples, 120 of them, had gathered *in those days*, and Peter brought up (surely at the prompting of the Holy Spirit) the matter of the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecy of the 12th Apostle. It is interesting that Luke does not, in his “orderly account”, continue in verse 15, his train of thought from the previous verse, verse 14. Rather than referring to those he'd just mentioned in verse 14, “*These all...*”, and saying something on the order of *in those days Peter stood up in the midst of them*, he turns a corner and now refers to a gathering of 120 disciples. He says, “*And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (...120...), and said...*” (1:15). The flow of thought does not seem to indicate that Peter was addressing those whom Luke had just listed in the previous verse, namely those who'd come from the Ascension and were staying in the Upper Room. This is clear.

Did Peter raise the issue of Judas' replacement with the entire 120? Indeed, he did. And this replacement was to be the fulfillment of Scriptural prophecies that Peter called out, and that Luke records. After their *process* Matthias was now a “uppercase A” Apostle, one of those 12 who would, “... *sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel*” (Matt 19:28); another prophecy referring to Messiah's mission fulfilled. Amen.

At the end of this procedure, Luke observes and records that Matthias was now numbered with the 11, in fact, as the 12th.

An interesting thing now occurs in all of our Bibles; a chapter break appears. These breaks I will remind you, are not inspired. Indeed, they are relatively recent in the history of Christianity; three fourths of Christianity's history existing without them, and only one fourth existing with them. Yes, they are a benefit to study... but sometimes perhaps, not so much to understanding. In fact, there are any number of places where the chapter breaks are in quite inconvenient places. Many of us with “reader's edition” Bibles can recall and point to places where a large, chapter number is in the middle of a paragraph. This is so because not infrequently, the chapter breaks interrupt a flow of thought. I believe that this is one of those places.

The beginning of Acts chapter 2 refers to a “they”. “... *they were all with one accord in one place*”. The inquiring mind wants to know, “Who's included in they?”. The overriding paradigm, which is cessationist in its foundations, brings us back to chapter 1, verse 15, where there are 120 people gathered. But let us consider, rather than our a-priori assumptions, what the verses themselves say. First, when did Luke last use that phrase “*with one accord*”, and to whom was he referring? The phrase was not used of the 120, but of Jesus' closest friends and family, those few mentioned in verses 13 and 14. In addition to that, let's look at to whom “they” might be referring if we ignore the chapter break. Here are verses 1:24 through 2:2, without the chapter breaks...

And they prayed and said, "You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place." And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And

*he was numbered with the eleven apostles. When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.*²

Without the interruption as if we were beginning a new thought, it is no stretch to believe that Luke is referring to the 11 (now 12) whom he had just mentioned. We tend naturally to think that Luke mentioned the 11 in a *previous* chapter. But *We* invented the chapters! Luke did not. Add to that the likelihood that Luke's note that "... *they were all with one accord...*" is likely be referring to the "new 12"... the 11 with the new fellow, the fulfillment of a prophecy, resulting in Matthias now being an "uppercase A" Apostle. This was a new fellow who was on their same page, met all the qualifications delineated, and was now with the 11 as one of them in a way that he had not been before; 12 "*in one accord in one place*" (Acts 2:1), as it were. The primary subject that Luke is discussing here is not the 120 disciples, but the 12 Apostles as fulfillment of Messianic prophecy.

For a moment, and just the sake of argument, let's assume that there *were* only 12 gathered, "...*with one accord in one place.*". What would that mean?

First of all, we must ask, "How did those (at least) 16 language groups hear in their own languages? It is not a foreign thought to believe that the tongues, or languages that the 12 were speaking was the same gift of tongues that is mentioned in 1Cor 12. In fact, is there any other? Once again, our a-priori assumptions tell us that these are known languages. But what does the Scripture say? 1Cor 12, which mentions the gift of tongues, is not a chapter about Spiritual gifts; which explains why it contains no explanation of any of those listed gifts. Rather, it is clearly a chapter about unity in the Body of Christ. That being said, the author of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul, does eventually explain a bit about tongues, prophecy and the interpretation of prophecy in chapter 14 of that same letter. From that chapter, verse 12, we can read... "*For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.*". Now it is clear from this, that there is a "speaking in tongues" that is something *other* than a known language. Of course we could make all kinds of assumptions about differing times, differing reasons, differing uses by God for His gifts, but those are all assumptions that the Scriptures do not say. Rather, the Scriptures speak of a tongue which "... *no one understands...*"; a tongue that God has *gifted* humans for speaking to Him, alone... "*he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God...*" .

In chapter 14, in his explanation of Spiritual gifts for the church in which they are manifesting, Paul goes on to make clear that the gift of prophecy manifests in two forms; either in a *known* tongue/language, and/or in an *unknown* tongue/language which then requires interpretation. If one has the gift of tongues (1Cor 12:10) without the gift of interpretation (1Cor 12:10), and there is no one present in their meetings whom has that gift and can interpret that tongue (1Cor 14:4-14), he ought just to speak to God, by himself, and neither disturb nor distract those around him. Now let us take the realities of Scripturally explained truths regarding Spiritual gifts, back to Acts chapter 2.

Is it possible that the 12 were speaking in tongues... unknown languages? Unless we apply our a-priori assumptions, then it is of course possible! We have asked a question about those *speaking*, but before we ask a similar question about those **hearing*, let us consider another

2 As an aside, notice that in Acts chapter 1, Luke makes reference to "*where they were staying* (Gr. *καταμενο*)", verse 13. In Acts chapter 2, when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, Luke makes reference to "*where they were sitting* (Gr. *καθημαι*)", verse 2.

chapter in Acts, as Luke unfolds the Holy Spirit's work in the New Christian Church.

In Acts chapter 10, we see Apostle Peter, though being the Apostle to the Jews (Gal 2:8), being used by God to open the door of the Good News, to the Gentiles. In that account, the “evidence” that God had opened the door of the Good News to the Gentiles was that the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as it had fallen upon the Apostles (Acts 10:44-46, 11:15).

The Spirit of God fell upon those whom God was calling. In fact Luke records that Peter testified, “*And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning.*” (Acts 11:15).

Peter and Cornelius were already communicating. Peter had shared the wonderful works of God's saving power in Jesus. What need was there of a known language in that circumstance? Obviously none; but if we assume that it must have been a known language, we do so, not according to what Scripture records as having happened, but in slavish obedience to a-priori theological assumptions, and/or the protection of a body of doctrine.

Cornelius and those gathered with him, received the filling of the Holy Spirit, just “...*as upon [the Apostles] at the beginning*”. They spoke with other tongues, with no need of interpretation, or of a known language being provided by God for the purpose of speaking to people of other languages. They had already heard the message from Peter in a language that they understood. Nevertheless, they spoke in tongues, just as the Apostles had on the day of Pentecost.

*Now let us return to asking a question about those *hearing* as opposed to those *speaking* the message on the day of Pentecost. Notice that in Acts 2:6-8, there is no indication that those hearing said anything like, “We each hear someone speaking in our own language.”. Neither is there any indication that any heard some speaking in their language, and others who were speaking in a language that was not their own, that they did not understand. Rather, what we hear in verse 6 is that, “... *everyone heard them speak in his own language*”. How is that possible? It is possible if those speaking were speaking in tongues, and those hearing – as Cornelius and his loved ones – had received the filling of the Holy Spirit and the simultaneous gifting that we read of in Acts chapter 10; only in the case of Acts 2, those speaking had received the gift of tongues, and those hearing, the gift of interpretation. This raises the question as to whether it is possible that an *immediate-filling-upon-belief* could have manifested in some Spiritual gift other than tongues, in this case, the interpretation of tongues? Of course it is possible! One might assert, as I have often heard, and as exists in the doctrinal statements of numerous churches, that every time it is recorded in the New Testament that the Spirit fell upon people, the evidence that this had happened was always that they spoke in tongues. Not so, as in the case of Acts chapter two. The assumption that the manifestation is *always* tongues, is also given to defend a “body of doctrine”, namely that the filling (Baptism) of the Holy Spirit is always manifested by the outward sign of speaking in tongues.³ Those who were being added to the church, upon whom the Spirit had fallen on the Day of Pentecost, received the gift of interpretation, not the gift of tongues.

The Acts 2 passage tells us that there were mockers who said that the “speakers” were drunk. Apparently, they did not hear in their own language. Rather they heard something leading them to conclude that the speakers were drunk. Would they have been accusing the speakers of drinking if they'd heard the Gospel... that same message that had been rocking Jerusalem for the last three plus years, in their own language? Had they heard that message (again) in a known

3 This is the doctrinal position of (at least) the Assemblies of God church, and the Church of God in Christ, the two largest Charismatic denominations in the nation.

language, they might well have denied the message, but they would not have leveled the accusation of drunkenness so early in the day. No, instead, these were not "... *those who were being saved.*" (Acts 2:47), and so they heard gibberish and accused the Apostles accordingly.

At that one occasion of Peter's sermon, those who were being saved numbered "... *about three thousand.*", and they all were able to hear the message in their own language (Acts 2:8). How is this all possible with only 12 individuals speaking? Immediate *fillings* of the Holy Spirit are indeed recorded as having occurred in new converts, and these fillings needn't be manifested in the gift of tongues only, as some assume. But if the 12 spoke in tongues, and the 3000 hearing were *filled* at the moment of their belief/acceptance/repentance/etc and as a result receiving the gift of interpretation so that they might understand, then what we have is **exactly** what we read in Acts chapter 2; and there is nothing unbiblical about any of those assumptions/understandings, In fact, the facts of the passage declare it.

As mentioned earlier, some might contest, "When the Holy Spirit fell, those upon whom He fell, always received the gift of tongues, and not any other gift." Once again, this is baking powder, based on the idea that the sign gifts didn't cease, but that they are *always* manifested in the same (normative) fashion as one or two particular passages seem to indicate.

It is remarkable, sometimes staggering to consider how much of our "accepted" theologies are based on a-priori theological assumptions and the protection of bodies of doctrine.

As we conclude, let's consider one more point from the passage. The "hearers" in Acts chapter 2 observed that "... *are not all these who speak Galileans?*". How, we might legitimately ask, were there 120 Galileans filled, 120 Galileans speaking, and 120 Galileans *staying* in that upper room, and 120 Galileans (only Galileans) being involved in the process of selecting the 12th Apostle?. It is not likely. That there could have been 120 Galileans gathered thus, and that there was an "... *upper room where they were staying.*" (Acts 1:13), that could have accommodated 120, all Galileans *staying*, is an ethnocentrism. We might imagine that being the case in an American city, or even in today's Jerusalem, but in first century Jerusalem it was not likely. In spite of that, we imagine anyway that perhaps it was John Mark's wealthy family, who might have had an upper room large enough for 120 Galileans to be staying, and not just gathering. While it is true that we are describing a miraculous event, this is not a likely scenario.

But this is what comes of a-priori theological assumptions, and defending bodies of doctrine, rather than letting Scripture say what it says, *and then* developing our beliefs accordingly. Reading the Scriptures, *seeing what is being said* in all the historical, cultural, sociological/societal, political, economic, linguistic, geographical contexts, etc, is exegesis. Determining what's being said based upon our theological schemes, be they cessationism, charismaticism or any others, is eisegesis.