

AUTOCHTHONOUS AND MULTICULTURAL: BELIEFS AND
BOUNDARY-KEEPING IN THE TRUE JESUS CHURCH¹

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Boundary-keeping is a necessary function of any human community, large or small. The human group may be liberally inclusive or radically exclusive. But boundary-keeping is simply the way by which that community knows itself. It helps shape and sustain the distinctive identity of the community.

As such, boundary-keeping is not intrinsically a negative activity that isolates the community from the outside world. It is the recognition that every structured (however loosely) human community has its distinctive identity, even if that identity cannot be fully articulated by its own members. Its ideas and practices function to tell itself and others who it is and why it exists. Boundary-keeping, put simply, is a group's identity with reference to its wider environment, a way of distinguishing itself within the world.

This essay is a brief examination of the spiritual practice of glossolalia in the True Jesus Church (TJC), suggesting that it is the church's most culturally distinct practice and a primary means of socio-religious boundary-keeping in relation to other Christian groups.

Praying in Spiritual Tongues—Observation

The event in which glossolalia or speaking in “spiritual tongues” is most frequently and consistently observed is in the church's corporate

¹ The substance of this paper has been presented at the following scholarly meetings: Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture, Center for Studies on New Religions, and Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

worship.² Across congregations, both Chinese and aboriginal, there is a remarkable similarity in practice.³ The infrequent prayer “with understanding” (praying in the vernacular) is usually reserved for special occasions that involve non-members—a practice which, by the way, is more an act of hospitality than embarrassment.

Among the various aspects of congregational life to explore, rituals are often the richest source of insight into a church’s culture and identity, and the regular worship event is the most potent. Worship intends to express the church’s self-aspirations and vision, who they are and who they are not. As a ritual, weekly corporate worship is predictable and routinized, offering a privileged vantage point for observing one of the TJC’s most distinctive spiritual practices.

The most regular and frequent context for corporate worship in the TJC is the weekly services—Sabbath evening, two services on the Sabbath, and a mid-week service. All services follow a set liturgical form: silent prayer, opening hymn, prayer, sermon, hymn, prayer followed by a sung refrain (often a familiar chorus), and announcements. The exceptional services include Holy Communion, Footwashing, early weekday morning services before members go to work, Spiritual Convocations, and evangelical Hymn-sings. Corporate prayer in spiritual tongues will occur in all services. The last two in particular include extended periods of time at the “altar” seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁴

Western observers will find TJC worship practices unpredictable at first, as they do not conform to the familiar western worship traditions. Outside the energetic “Pentecostal-type” prayer time, worship is formal

² “Spiritual tongues” is the preferred term for glossolalia within the True Jesus Church. The reason will be discussed below.

Since beginning research on the True Jesus Church in 2008, I have visited congregations in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China and Canada. Glossolalic prayer in an Indian Tamil congregation in Kuala Lumpur is fundamentally the same as in other TJC congregations.

Methodologically, theological ideas will be interspersed with ethnographic studies, with particular reference to congregational practices; see Nancy Ammerman, et al., eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 78-104.

⁴ The order of Sabbath worship is published in *Sacred Worker’s Handbook 2000*, p. 3-1.

and preaching is delivered with low emotional affect. The repertoire of hymns includes a large number from the early missionary movement.⁵

Corporate prayer occurs twice during worship, and occasionally at the end of the service when people are invited to the front of the church to pray and seek the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The two scheduled prayer times predictably last about 2-3 minutes in mainland China and 5-6 minutes in other regions, while the “altar” prayer period extends to 15-20 minutes.

Prayer follows a predictable pattern. The liturgical instructions are simple and straightforward: the worshipper is to kneel, clasp hands, and begin by saying, “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I pray.”⁶ At that moment, as the worship presider leads with the same words, worshippers begin to pray aloud and simultaneously with others.⁷ The prayer period lasts for about 5-6 minutes, and is stopped with the ringing of a bell by the leader. Official leaders (preachers, elders, deacons and deaconesses) are authorized to pray with the seekers by circulating among them, gently laying hands on their heads and praying in tongues.

A number of features of TJC corporate praying are evident. First, one is immediately struck by the *loud and animated expressions of prayer*. This is intentional and often explained during services when visitors are present, especially to assure them that this is “normal” practice rather than hysterical outburst. The TJC believes that worshippers are to enter fully—soul and body—into the act of prayer. In this way they are opening themselves more fully to the Holy Spirit whose presence is then released within them in greater power. As one writer instructs, Holy Spirit seekers are to “pray earnestly and

⁵ The continuing use of old missionary hymns is not unique to the True Jesus Church. I recall recently singing many familiar hymns for over an hour with a young minister of the Three-Self church in China, hymns she knew by memory and are obviously current in today’s Chinese Protestant churches.

⁶ See *Our Basic Beliefs Explained*, Gospel Series (Anaheim, CA: True Jesus Church, Department of Literary Ministry, 2007), 112. I was informed that this practice is a more recent innovation within the last thirty years, at least in Taiwan.

⁷ Praying aloud simultaneously, or concert prayer, is not distinctive to the TJC. In Asia, it became a distinctive feature of the 1907 Korean Revival. And it has been the common pattern of prayer in the western Pentecostal-charismatic tradition from its beginning.

diligently.”⁸ An elder TJC theologian, Sun Tao Hsieh, who wrote extensively on the theology of the Holy Spirit, states that effective prayer is not the result of vain repetitions or lengthy prayers but “sincerity and earnestness.”⁹

The second unique feature is that those worshippers “gifted” immediately begin to *pray in spiritual tongues*. Unlike the traditional practice of offering thanksgiving and intercessions (as in praying “with the understanding”), TJC glossolalic prayer is more like a yielding of the body and tongue to the Spirit. Those who do not yet speak in tongues are instructed to pray, “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord Jesus,” since “this is the way the multitude in heaven worships (see Rev. 19:1)”.¹⁰ It has also been explained that, as one prays in this way, the Holy Spirit is stirred up within their spirit which eventually yields to spiritual tongues.

Undoubtedly, the most distinctive aspect of the TJC phenomenon of speaking in tongues is the actual *sound and expression*. Unlike western verbalizations of glossolalia which generally reflect a language-like pattern, TJC glossolalia makes no pretense to sound like a language. The most prominent and distinctive phenomenon is the rapid rolling of the tongue. While some of these sounds are familiar in western glossolalia, they are infrequent and generally integrated with other language-like sound patterns. On an occasion when I commented that I could roll my tongue unaided by the Spirit, it was explained that when the Spirit inspires it, one can roll the tongue for hours without tiring.¹¹

The third readily observable feature is the *physicality* of the praying. As soon as the worshippers begin to pray, their bodies begin to move or vibrate, especially in the hands, arms and shoulders. Again, the

⁸ *Essential Biblical Doctrines*, Doctrinal Series, 2nd English edition (Garden Grove, CA: True Jesus Church, Department of Literary Ministry, 2000), 125. The author, the late John Yang, was an early popular expounder of TJC beliefs in the Taiwan church.

⁹ Sun Tao Hsieh, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Doctrinal Series, adapted (Anaheim, CA: True Jesus Church, Department of Literary Ministry, 2008), 325.

¹⁰ *Basic Beliefs Explained*, 112.

¹¹ Interview, “Preacher, Timothy Yeung,” Toronto TJC, June 16, 2007. Apparently in the early years of the TJC revival, prayer meetings with speaking in tongues could last for 2-3 hours.

range of movement is generally limited in a way that makes it recognizable from church to church and region to region.

When the leader decides to conclude the prayer time, a bell is rung, and within seconds the praying ceases. The leader then leads in singing a short familiar refrain, after which the congregation is seated.

In summary, for a western observer familiar with Pentecostal-charismatic phenomena, and in my experience for other Asian Christians as well, the phenomenon of spiritual tongues in the TJC is unique in three ways. It is accorded a *value and priority in TJC worship* that one could argue is equal to that of preaching—not in terms of authority but in validation of the church's identity. Second, the *phenomenon of spiritual tongues is distinctive*, especially in that it does not reflect the more familiar western language-like pattern. Finally, the activity of speaking in tongues is accompanied by *routinized bodily movements or vibrations*, most of which are consistent across the TJC church. Physical manifestations are common within the Pentecostal-charismatic movement, but both expectations and expressions vary culturally.¹² In the next section, we will observe that the theological explanation is consistent with the physical manifestations and spiritual tongues, which are also different from other Christian glossolalic expressions.

Spiritual Tongues—True Jesus Church Theology

The TJC is clear and consistent in its theological interpretation of spiritual tongues and how the “gift” functions in the church and lives of its members. Much of it diverges significantly from western Pentecostal-charismatic understandings. The most thorough articulation and explanation of the TJC doctrine is found in Elder Sun Tao Hsieh's *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, though the same views are expressed briefly in other writings. Three aspects of TJC doctrine of spiritual tongues in particular point up the church's uniqueness.

First, the *miracle of spiritual tongues is in the hearing*, not the speaking. The context is the first biblical account of tongues, on the Day of Pentecost, as recorded in the Book of Acts. When the Holy

¹² To illustrate, I have observed spiritual dancing in three major North American cultures, white Anglo (English, Scottish, Irish communities in which I was reared), African American, and First Nations native. In each instance, the dance form reflected its culture.

Spirit descended on the praying disciples, they “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (2:4, NRSV). But when the event spilled into the streets, Jews from the various regions of the Roman Empire marveled, “how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own language?” (2:8). In that moment, “God opened the ears of the Jews so that they heard the disciples speaking in their own languages.”¹³

Western Pentecostal-charismatic traditions generally interpret this event as the disciples’ miraculous speaking in the various languages of the hearers. Many early Pentecostals, beginning with Charles Parham, believed that the miracle was xenolalia, the ability to speak in other human languages as enabled by the Holy Spirit. This resulted in missionaries leaving port for distant shores, trusting God to grant them the ability to speak the language when they disembarked. To no one’s surprise, they were disappointed.¹⁴ The consensus of most Pentecostals and charismatics today is that tongues is “language-like” but not an actual human language.¹⁵

Second, consistent with tongues as a miracle of hearing, the TJC teaches that *it is a “spiritual language,” unrelated to any earthly language.*¹⁶ This teaching can be traced back at least to a public meeting in Barnabas Zhang’s Taiwan campaign of 1925-26, during which he explained to his Presbyterian detractors that Fang Yin, the dialect of tongues, was exclusively a dialect of the Holy Spirit and “not to be found in this world.” He redirected the attention of his hearers to

¹³ *Q&A on the Basic Beliefs*, Inquiry Series (Garden Grove, CA: True Jesus Church, Department of Literary Ministry, 2000), 98; Yang, *Essential Biblical Doctrines*, pp. 124-25.

¹⁴ One celebrated case, and one of the first, was Apostolic Faith missionary, A.G. Garr, and his wife, who arrived in Hong Kong in 1907, confident that his wife would be able to speak fluent Chinese. Garr was one of the first Pentecostal missionaries to test the belief, and the first to reject it. Scholar J. Gordon Melton believes that, with that rejection, Garr came to believe and teach that tongues is a purely devotional expression with no connection to human language or language-like sounds (unpublished paper).

¹⁵ David Hilborn, “Glossolalia as Communication—A Linguistic-Pragmatic Perspective,” chapter 5 in Mark Cartledge, ed., *Speaking in Tongues—Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), 117.

¹⁶ *Essential Biblical Doctrines*, 124.

the spiritual effect of the experience—personal transformation and the ability to “withstand the evils and sins of the world.”¹⁷

Elder Hsieh uses Paul’s writings, both the Corinthian literature and Letter to the Romans, to interpret the Acts account. All manifestations of tongues, recorded in Acts or Corinth, are in Paul’s words, “speaking mysteries to God.”¹⁸ Their function may vary, but the phenomenon is in all cases a heavenly language, including the “groanings” in Romans 8. Furthermore, whether the congregation or even the speaker understands what is being said or not is irrelevant because the agent is the Spirit who is ministering to the individual through the medium of spiritual tongues: “The spiritual tongue spoken in personal prayer towards God does not require interpretation (I Corin. 14: 2, 28) because it is the Spirit Himself interceding for the believer with ‘groanings which cannot be uttered’ (Rom. 8:26-27).”¹⁹

Since tongues is a spiritual or heavenly language, the manner of expression without language-like sounds reinforces the teaching. But Hsieh emphasizes that, though the speaker does not understand what is being said, these “mysteries” being spoken are a form of communication, even if not rationally grasped: “Even though a person who prays in tongues cannot be understood by others or by himself, the tongues are inherently meaningful.”²⁰

This is in marked contrast to the traditional Pentecostal view that tongues in Acts is exclusively evidential of the reception of Spirit baptism, distinct from Paul’s teaching on the public use of tongues in

¹⁷ Murray A. Rubinstein, “Evangelical Spring: The Origin of the True Jesus Church on Taiwan, 1925-1926,” Paper read at the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, November 13-15, 1986, 43-44. If Melton is correct, the TJC view of tongues as a “spiritual language” may be traced to Garr. But even if this is true, we are not sure that the sounds which Garr heard are the same as those of the TJC followers. Further, our primary concern here focuses on how the TJC theologically understands its own practice of tongues in a way that confirms its exclusive claim to be the only true church.

For an introduction to the various views of glossolalia, see Russell Spittler, “Glossolalia,” *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002): 670-76.

¹⁸ Hsieh, *Holy Spirit*, 232, citing Paul in I Corinthians 14:2.

¹⁹ Hsieh, *Holy Spirit*, 215.

²⁰ Hsieh, *Holy Spirit*, 225; see also page 236.

the assembly and private use for personal edification.²¹ Hsieh unifies all three—Acts, Corinthians, Romans—under the cohering theological view that tongues is a dialect of the Spirit; hence his preference for the term, “spiritual” tongues.

Hsieh outlines four functions of spiritual tongues. In summary, they are the following.

1. Intercession—the Holy Spirit uses the human body to “intercede” for the individual;
2. A sign for unbelievers—Tongues on the Day of Pentecost was a “powerful sign” to convince the Jews present that the prophecies of the coming Holy Spirit were indeed true;
3. Self-edification—the act of speaking in spiritual tongues is the Spirit’s means of strengthening the person; without self-edification, one cannot edify or strengthen others;
4. Edification of the church—this occurs in the form of “preaching in tongues,” which requires an inspired interpreter to convey the Spirit’s message to the congregation.²²

The question is frequently raised regarding Paul’s admonition to refrain from speaking in tongues in the assembly if there is no interpreter. Hsieh interprets Paul to mean that one is not to interrupt or interfere with the preaching of the Word. So long as that boundary is respected, corporate prayer in tongues is acceptable. Individuals praying in tongues together in the assembly are communally edifying themselves.

The third distinctive mark of TJC understanding of spiritual tongues is its emphasis on the presence of *visible, physical manifestations*. Hsieh regards physical phenomena as secondary in importance to tongues (the “primary evidence” of Spirit baptism), but still notes that when the Spirit is actively present, “there is often the accompaniment of visible signs.” He refers back to Acts 2:33, in recounting the effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit as this “that you both see and hear.”²³ This explains the value which the TJC places upon the physical phenomena—they are an “accompanying” sign of the

²¹ Charismatic theologies may vary on the evidential character of tongues in Acts, but they likewise do not unify the biblical accounts under the view that tongues is a heavenly or spiritual language, as does the TJC.

²² Hsieh, *Holy Spirit*, 222-228.

²³ Hsieh, *Holy Spirit*, 220-21.

Spirit's presence and activity. As Yang states, "When the Holy Spirit comes upon us, our bodies will be visibly shaken."²⁴

The relationship between the Holy Spirit and physical manifestations is captured best in the name of a radicalized sect that left the TJC around 1985 in Jiangsu province. Called the *Ling-ling Jiao*, the name is translated "Spirit-Spirit Sect." But the Chinese tonal quality of the second "spirit" reveals the difference in meaning between the two "spirits." As Asian scholar, Edmond Tang, observes, "the first 'spirit' in its name refers to the Holy Spirit, and the second 'spirit' . . . refers to the 'spiritual proof' of the work of the Spirit in the Christian."²⁵

It is interesting that Yang provides biblical quotations to substantiate his belief that bodily movements will accompany the presence of the Holy Spirit (such as the disciples appearing to be drunk on the Day of Pentecost). But he also mentions, without biblical reference, that "at times, some may accuse one of being possessed of evil spirits."²⁶ It may well be that this inclusion alludes to accusations of demon possession against the TJC itself by observers who find the bodily vibrations to be strange and spiritually unattractive.²⁷

In all three interpretations of spiritual tongues—tongues as the miracle of hearing, as a heavenly language with an expression unlike Pentecostal-charismatic tongues, and as visible manifestations that accompany tongues—the TJC displays its distinctive identity and thereby erects a boundary of difference in relation to other groups that speak in tongues.

Spiritual Tongues and Communication Theories

Mark Cartledge, practical theologian and scholar on the Pentecostal-charismatic movement, is probably not overstating the

²⁴ Yang, *Essential Biblical Doctrines*, 124.

²⁵ Edmond Tang, "'Yellers' and Healers—Pentecostalism and the Study of Grassroots Christianity in China," chapter 19 in Anderson, *Asian and Pentecostal*, p. 480.

²⁶ Yang, *Essential Biblical Doctrines*, 124. He does acknowledge that physical phenomena may accompany the presence of evil spirits; in such cases he provides a process for discerning the source of the phenomena, 125-26; see a detailed treatment in Hsieh, *Holy Spirit*, 386-400.

²⁷ I am occasionally asked if I believe the TJC practices are occultist.

claim that “the phenomenon of speaking in tongues was probably the most researched religious form of speech in the latter half of the twentieth century.”²⁸ When the charismatic movement burst on the scene in the 1960’s, psychologists, social scientists, linguistic experts and theologians, converged on Pentecostal-charismatic centers of worship to examine in detail the phenomenon which was at the same time most puzzling but irresistibly alluring—glossolalia.

Conclusions were mixed but an improvement over the crude and hostile conclusions of psychological studies dating to the early decades of the century. A review of studies over the past fifty years reveals greater sophistication in methods and cooperation across disciplines, and more openness to a phenomenon that is at once physical (so accessible to empirical investigation) and spiritual.²⁹

My interest in this final section is how recent studies in communication theory might shed light on the phenomenon of spiritual tongues in the TJC. I draw upon the insights of two authors, David Hilborn and James K.A. Smith, whose essays appear in the recent volume edited by Cartledge, *Speaking in Tongues: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*. Hilborn addresses the issue of glossolalia as communication, and Smith discusses glossolalia as resistance discourse.

The problem as posed by Hilborn is how glossolalia can be considered a form of communication. It falls somewhere between infantile babble and the complex sound patterns of natural language (Vern Poythress). In his early study, William Samarin described what he heard as pseudo-linguistic, with traces of natural language, but falling short of linguistic communication. Hilborn cites the conclusion of language theorist, Michael T. Motley, that theories to date have been unable to account for how “language-like nonlanguage behaviours” such as glossolalia can communicate.³⁰

²⁸ Cartledge, *Speaking in Tongues*, xix.

²⁹ For an excellent critical review of studies from the various disciplines over the past century, see William Kay, “The Mind, Behaviour and Glossolalia—A Psychological Perspective,” chapter 7 in Cartledge, *Speaking in Tongues*, 174-205. I am also indebted to one of my students, Noreen Jacka, who reviewed the literature on empirical and theological studies relating to charismatic glossolalia during the last half of the twentieth century.

³⁰ Hilborn, “Glossolalia as Communication,” 117.

The work of theorists, J.L. Austin and Searle, helps Hilborn move forward in understanding the non-semantic dimension of speech. In their view, the total speech act is contextual. Beyond the mere vocalizing of words (the locutionary act), the speaker also intends to communicate something more than brute facts; hence, how the words are delivered is significant (the illocutionary act). The final stage is the effect of the speech on the hearer (the perlocutionary act). One sub-level of the illocutionary act, the Expressive, relates to glossolalia, as it communicates the affective tone of the speech—confession, lament, thanking, celebrating, praising, etc. Some expressions—like “Hurrah!”—do not communicate propositional information. In other words, Hilborn concludes that if speech is also a mode of action rather than a mere conduit for passing on facts, and can communicate meaning through feeling and emotions without reference to “facts,” then glossolalia might be regarded as a form of communication.

Since communication requires a receiver, Hilborn finds a more nuanced insight into how a non-propositional message can be received. Sterber and Wilson point out that theoretically there remains a gap between the message sent and what is received. Since there is no fully “mutual knowledge,” Sterber and Wilson propose that the gap be filled with a process called “inference.” A message can be communicated non-verbally, by gesture or signal, and inferred by the receiver. A mere eye gesture or pointing of a finger can direct the receiver’s attention in a way that the receiver may infer the point of the speaker’s message, and thereby draw meaning.

Applied to the TJC, the loud and earnest praying may well communicate a message regarding the serious intent of the person praying when engaged in spiritual tongues. While that intent may be misunderstood or misinterpreted by the uninformed visitor, the primary function is aimed to confirm and strengthen the identity of the church itself. And the idiosyncratic sounds and movements may well serve to reinforce the boundaries of identity. Sterber and Wilson’s notion of “relevance” refers not to relationship with the wider world but rather “to the distinct identity of the church...to the self-understanding of Christians ‘set apart’ . . . Public tongues-speech both authenticates and communicates the church’s unique calling from God, its special devotion to God, and its particular destiny in God.”³¹

Hilborn’s purpose is to demonstrate that recent studies in communication theory are creating greater theoretical space for the

³¹ Hilborn, “Glossolalia as Communication,” 144-45.

possibility that real communication can occur in ways that reach beyond the propositional transference of information. Even though Hilborn is assuming the general western view that tongues is language-like, the theories employed here apply equally to the TJC practice of glossolalia that lacks phonological patterns. He concludes: “Even if the factual content of public tongues-speech remains inscrutable, and even if its semantic translatability remains indemonstrable, its communicative force may still be mutually manifest to those who deliver and receive it, on the basis of their strong shared assumptions about its expressive value in relation to God and the worship of God.”³²

We turn finally to James Smith’s essay on glossolalia as “resistance discourse.”³³ Two factors in the early formation of the TJC provide at least the possibility for discerning a ‘resistance factor’ in its beginning. One was the growing climate of resistance to all things western, including the missionary movement. The TJC was officially established in 1917, a moment on the cusp of that transitional period.

For the first two decades of the 20th century, the western missionary activity in China was at its height.³⁴ But the 1920’s witnessed an increasing dissatisfaction with the Christian movement being controlled by missionaries and their agencies, and the TJC was one of the most vocal in its opposition. Paul Wei, a founding worker of the TJC, had already been critical of the missionary presence and stirred anti-foreign sentiment within the early TJC. As Asian scholar, Daniel Bays, comments, the earliest TJC, “insisted that Chinese Christians renounce their old Churches and acknowledge the sole legitimacy of the True Jesus Church and its unique dogma.”³⁵

To add to the anti-missionary platform, the early TJC believed that it was raised up in the last days before the return of Christ to take the pure gospel to the rest of the world. In a reversal of the prevailing global tide of Christian missions, its calling was to spread the gospel

³² Hilborn, “Glossolalia as Communication,” 140.

³³ James K.A. Smith, “Tongues as ‘Resistance Discourse’—A Philosophical Perspective,” chapter 4 in Cartledge, *Speaking in Tongues*, 81-110.

³⁴ Daniel H. Bays, “Christian Revival in China, 1900-1937,” chapter 9 in Edith L. Blumhofer and Randall Balmer, eds., *Modern Christian Revivals* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 166.

³⁵ Daniel H. Bays, “The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900-1937,” chapter 17 in Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 311.

from east to west. As early as 1911, another founding leader, Barnabas Zhang, reported that he heard a voice from heaven saying, “The grace of salvation for all people in the last days will arise from the east to the west.”³⁶

A second factor for a possible TJC “resistance discourse” may well be Wei’s strong restorationist views that considered all other Christian churches to be in error. The earliest name of his church says it all—The Universal Correction Church. In other words, the TJC was born as a resistance movement to both the western missionary movement and to all other Christian bodies.

Smith’s proposal is that tongues-speech is the “language of communities of resistance who seek to defy the powers that be.”³⁷ Philosophically, he draws on the work of Martin Heidegger and later, Austin and Searle, to demonstrate that all knowledge is interpreted. That is, we have no direct access to the world, since we engage it through our own lens of presuppositions and social situatedness.

Drawing, as does Hilborn, from the insights of Austin and Searle, he states that language is “a social phenomenon, governed by rules that are constituted by a community.”³⁸ Speech in this mode, then, is a form of action, since it expresses the needs and concerns of particular communities. As a corollary, speech can be expressed as gesture as well as words. Consequently, language is political and may express in words and action a community’s resistance to “the powers that be.”

Smith’s aim is to frame tongues-speech as communal speech and gesture of resistance. His direct application is the poor Pentecostal communities in the Majority World. Tongues-speech for them is a radical protest to the conventional and rational discourse of the prevailing oppressive capitalist systems. Poor Pentecostals are radically other, situated over against the repressive systems of the world. For this reason, he prefers to view tongues-speech as “ecstatic” or otherworldly, since any effort to understand it in terms of language-like speech or xenolalia will cause it to lose its resistance power. But for our purpose, Smith is helping us think about how spiritual tongues in the TJC may include a “resistance factor” that can be traced to its origins.

³⁶ Hsieh, *Holy Spirit*, 194.

³⁷ Smith, “Tongues as ‘Resistance Discourse,’” 81.

³⁸ Smith, “Tongues as ‘Resistance Discourse,’” 99.

Conclusion—Special Tongues

As one reads TJC literature regarding Spirit baptism and the signifying evidence of its reception in spiritual tongues, there is little to indicate that tongues in the TJC differs phenomenologically from the practice in Pentecostal-charismatic circles, except for two things: the insistence that spiritual tongues is a heavenly language, and the accompanying physical vibratory movements.

But it becomes clear that when Spirit baptism is located within the broader context of TJC core doctrinal tenets, the church's self-understanding is that spiritual tongues is utterly unique and dissimilar from Pentecostal-charismatic expressions. Spirit baptism with spiritual tongues in the TJC is inseparably woven into the church's identity as the one true church. Elder Hsieh states it clearly, if a little bluntly: "There is only one gospel of salvation. Two churches with different beliefs on salvation cannot be both true, because the true church only has one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism."³⁹ The implication is clear: whatever is happening in the TJC experience of tongue-speaking, it is fundamentally different from other tongue-speaking practices and is fundamentally related to its identity.

We have already observed this difference at two levels: in TJC writings and the above description of the practice. I conclude with the third level of observation—personal and anecdotal experience. Admittedly not official teaching, the following three encounters illustrate ways in which spiritual tongues serves to reinforce the exclusive and unique character of the TJC.

The first occurred during a sermon in which the preacher, fully aware that I was present, claimed that the phenomenon of tongues outside the TJC must be *demonically inspired* because, if its source were the Holy Spirit, one would be led to the truth as taught by the TJC.⁴⁰

The second case was a conversation in which I was asked what I do when others are praying in tongues. Since I was reared Pentecostal and have experienced glossolalia, I simply responded that I also pray in tongues. One person, with whom I frequently sat beside in worship,

³⁹ Hsieh, *Holy Spirit*, 143.

⁴⁰ I confirmed with the preacher following the service that I did understand him correctly, since the sermon was delivered through a translator. Others also confirmed that this interpretation was not an official view nor taught in the TJC seminary in Taichung, Taiwan.

responded quickly, “I don’t think so.” As the conversation proceeded, it became clear that “my” tongues was not the same as theirs because my friend could not hear me (I was not praying loudly and earnestly enough), and my tongues did not sound like theirs either. In other words, my verbalization was *phenomenologically deficient* to be considered true spiritual tongues.

The third instance was an appeal to the *unique quality* of TJC spiritual tongues. In a personal conversation with three TJC leaders, my tongues experience was not categorically disqualified, but I was urged to seek the deeper, more intimate and more powerful experience of tongues. I was assured that their spiritual tongues was qualitatively different from mine, that I would clearly know the difference, and that it was apparent that I had not yet received it.

In all three levels, spiritual tongues in the TJC is *sui generis*, utterly unique. Whether or not the TJC official position that it, and it alone, is the one true church, can be sustained in the future, is discussion for another day. But for now, its core beliefs and practices are internally coherent and, as I have attempted to demonstrate, function to reinforce the church’s exclusive identity and practice of boundary-keeping. Among those functions, the church’s practice of spiritual tongues is the most visible and potent communal act that is at once culturally autochthonous and theologically exclusive.