The Gift of Tongues

A Pentecostal Perspective on Spiritual Gifts

Introduction

In the gift of tongues has been both a source of genuine spiritual encouragement and a source of significant confusion within the Church. Scripture presents tongues as a real work of the Holy Spirit, yet it also places boundaries around its use that many contemporary practices have left behind. This study attempts to recover the coherence of the gift by the standard of Scripture alone, before tradition, and to the back of the governance where Scripture leaves no room.

It begins Church as communion. We affirm the Holy Spirit's baptism and desire to distribute gifts to His will, and we gladly acknowledge that tongues may occur today. At the same time, we refuse to treat tongues as a universal sign of spiritual maturity, or to elevate an experience of spiritual intensity. We seek to honour the Spirit by submitting our doctrine and practice to the authority of Scripture, for the peace, clarity, and edification of the church.

Tongues in the New Testament

Scripture presents more than one manifestation of tongues. Distinguishing these categories can help the Church avoid confusion and harm.

A. Tongues in Acts: Known, unintelligible human languages

In Pentecost, believers spoke in real human languages that they had not learned, and the hearers understood them directly.

> "Heard it at their tongues, each of us in his own native language?" (Acts 2:8)

Purpose and Function in Acts 2:

- Apostles, intelligible sign that the Holy Spirit had been poured out
- A universal proclamation of the mighty works of God to the nations
- A confirmation of the gospel's expansion beyond ethnic Israel
- A visible reversal of Babel in the nations are gathered through Christ

In Acts 2, tongues are not presented as scripture speech. They are Spirit-enabled communication that is understood by those present.

B. Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14: Unintelligible without interpretation

In Corinth, tongues appear to function as speech that is not understood by others unless interpreted.

> "For one speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God, for no one understands him." (1 Corinthians 14:2)

Key features of Corinthian tongues:

- Tongues require interpretation to edify the church
- Without interpretation, tongues are unproductive for public worship
- Tongues are not gift among many and are not superior to other gifts
- Tongues are explicitly not normal

Paul's repeated concern is edification, not expression.

What is the purpose of the gift of tongues?

In 1 Corinthians, tongues function as a regulated sign gift: when purpose is not of expression or spiritual validation, but the personal edification of the church through interpretation.

> "If I speak in tongues, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful." (1 Corinthians 14:14)

> "I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also. I will sing with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also." (1 Corinthians 14:15)

Scripture does not provide a detailed or prescriptive theology of a private prayer language. It offers limited data and **therefore requires theological restraint not stipulation.**

What is the purpose of the gift of tongues?

If spirit, prayer, spiritual sense of of tongues exists, its purpose is limited to personal prayer directed toward God. It is not mediation, it is not teaching, and it is not a means of receiving new information from God. It is communion with God, not communication to the church.

Paul acknowledges that uninterpreted tongues build up the individual (1 Corinthians 14:4), but he does not present this as a suitable for corporate worship. Paul's governing principle remains edification of the church.

How should it operate?

If exercised, very quietly.

Paul's instructions are prescriptive. Paul instructs the speaker to be silent in the church and speak to himself and to God (1 Corinthians 14:28). This does not prepare estimated use of tongues outside the public gathering.

Humility, not power/priority

Because Scripture never commands believers to seek this practice, it must never be taught as necessary, superior, or expected.

Embodiment, not tongues, and intelligible prayer

Paul instructs, will, sing with the mind also (1 Corinthians 14:15). Intelligible prayer remains primary. Any private practice must remain secondary.

Evaluating fruit, not gifts

Any practice that cultivates spiritual pride, creates division, or elevates experiences above Scripture violates the Spirit's purpose and the Bible's command.

Paul's Clarifications and a Common Objection

There is a common argument made from Paul's text. The argument goes something like this. "Paul implies that everyone should speak in tongues, and that is a gift that all should have."

> "I wish that you all spoke in tongues." (1 Corinthians 14:5)

> "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all you." (1 Corinthians 14:18)

Just in a class, we absolutely understand how someone could come to that conclusion based on those verses. However, we point out that these statements must be read in context and alongside Paul's full teaching.

A. Paul's wish is personal, not prescriptive.

Paul expresses personal desires elsewhere that are clearly not commands, such as wishing all believers were single like himself (1 Corinthians 7:7). He is not in prescribing that Christians should be single. A personal desire does not create a universal command.

B. Paul explicitly denies that tongues are for everyone.

Paul asks, "Do all speak with tongues?" (1 Corinthians 12:30). The expected answer is no. Tongues are not universal, and believers are not expected to seek tongues based on whether they have the gift.

C. Paul subordinates tongues to prophecy and intelligibility.

Paul immediately adds that he desires prophecy even more, because it builds up the church (1 Corinthians 14:5). He repeatedly argues that intelligible speech is more valuable in the gathering than uninterpreted tongues.

D. Paul's practice supports restraint, not excess

Paul follows his statement about speaking in tongues more than all with a decisive principle.

> "Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue." (1 Corinthians 14:19)

Paul uses his experience to correct Corinthian pride. The idea being that even if tongues are real and beneficial in some contexts, they are not to dominate corporate worship.

Tongues in the Early Church

The early Church affirmed the reality of gifts while exercising caution.

A. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202 AD)

Irenaeus is often cited as evidence that tongues continued beyond the apostolic age, and this is true. However, the way he references tongues is instructive.

In *against Heresies* 5.6.1, Irenaeus writes:

> "In like manner do we also hear many brethren in the Church who prove prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God."

What is significant is **how** Irenaeus uses this material:

- No binocular, no gift is mentioned
- No expectation is placed on believers to speak in tongues
- No doctrine of normal existence is present
- Tongues are never used to defend a doctrine or spirituality

For Irenaeus, the marks of the true Church are **apostolic doctrine, unity, and holiness**, not charismatic expression.

B. Tertullian (c. 155-240 AD)

Tertullian is significant for documenting spiritual discernment in tongues, not because he gave detailed instructions on prophetic language, but it comes from his proximity to the earliest charismatic community in church history.

In the two treatises, *against Marcion* and *against Praxeas*, Tertullian mentions a sister, specifically, spontaneous prophetic utterances, and claims of their frequency by the Spirit that functioned alongside, and at times above, apostolic teaching. While Irenaeus treats prophetic gifts primarily as proof that tongues, or charismatic manifestations, with later abuses of tongues, namely unregulated utterances, appeal to immediate spiritual inspiration, and disruption of ordered order.

In the earlier orthodox writings, Tertullian insists that the gifts of spiritual activity must be governed by the apostolic rule of faith. Prophetic discern Hymns is, he writes:

> "Those who used strange tongues and who, when such a sister has been lowered down into the church, in which meets have been established, and in the midst of the faithful, she speaks her visions, and then, as God chooses, he is seen to speak to her interpretations of these visions." (Against Praxeas)

In other words, any claim to spiritual authority must be tested by whether it aligns with the apostolic faith and the Scriptures, before anything accepted simply because it is presented as a work of the Spirit.

This principle was decisive in the Church's rejection of Montanism. The issue was not whether the Spirit could act, but whether spiritual power, including ecstatic utterance, could operate independently of Scripture and the apostolic authority of the Scriptures.

The Montanists contended that Scriptures that the early Church learned quickly that unregulated spiritual enthusiasm (even when sincerely based in divinity and doctrinal instability) rather than edification. The historical moment shaped the Church's lasting instinct to regulate all forms of charismatic speech, including tongues, by Scripture, order, and mutual oversight.

Though we mean to be fair and honest, it is important to note that Tertullian later aligned himself with Montanism, the broader Church ultimately rejected the movement precisely because it placed ecstatic revelation beyond apostolic authority.

C. Origen and Augustine

By the third and fourth centuries, tongues were less frequently reported, and the Church devoted an anxiety about their decline.

Origen (c. 185-254 AD), in *against Celsus* 2.8, acknowledges that miracles were more prominent during the apostolic age, but he treats their absence as a feature of the new dispensation, not a problem to be **restored**, not an spiritual loss.

Augustine is even more explicit. In *Homilies on the First Epistle of John* 6.10, he writes:

> "In the primitive times, the Holy Ghost fell upon those that believed, and they spoke with tongues, which they had not learned, to the edifying of those who understand. This was a sign adapted to the time; the Holy Ghost was to be shed forth, beginning at the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the earth speedily. That thing was done for a sign, and it passed away."

Augustine does not deny God's power. He explains tongues **theologically** as a sign tied to the Church's foundational expansion, not as a continuing norm for Christian devotion.

Early Church patterns

Across the patristic era, the pattern is consistent:

- Tongues are affirmed as real where they appear
- Tongues are never treated as normal
- Tongues are never required of believers
- Tongues are never used as a test of salvation or maturity

Orthodoxy was measured by **faithfulness to apostolic teaching, holiness of life, endurance under suffering, and unity in Christ**, not charismatic experience.

The Reformers and Historical Caution

The Protestant Reformers inherited centuries of Church experience with spiritual enthusiasm that often drifted from Scripture. Their caution was shaped not by skepticism toward the Spirit, but by pastoral concern for clarity, assurance, and doctrinal stability.

A. Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Luther strongly opposed what he called *Schwarmer* (enthusiasts), spiritual movements that claimed direct revelation or spiritual experience apart from the Word of God.

In his *Commentary on the Epistle of John*, Luther writes:

> "For God does not want to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. Whatever is proclaimed in the Spirit apart from the Word and Sacraments is of the devil."

Luther's concern was pastoral. Experience detached from Scripture undermines assurance and opens the door to deception. His critique was not aimed narrowly at tongues, but broadly at any spirituality that elevated experience over the Word.

B. John Calvin (1509-1564)

Calvin understood tongues as a sign gift associated with the Church's early foundation.

In his *Commentary on Acts*, Calvin writes:

> "This was a temporary gift, which served to adorn the Gospel for a time... But it was expedient that the Gospel should be first magnificently furnished with miracles in its first beginning, to procure authority to it."

Similarly, in his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14*, Calvin emphasizes intelligibility and edification, arguing that **anything which obscures understanding undermines the purpose of worship.**

Even if one disagrees with Calvin's cessationist conclusion, his interpretive principle remains deeply biblical: God's Word exists for clarity, intelligibility, and mutual edification.

Reformed Instincts

The Reformed tradition developed a strong commitment to:

- **Order in worship**
- **Clarity in teaching**
- **Restraint in spiritual claims**
- **Submission of experience to Scripture**

This was not generally seen as hostility toward the Holy Spirit. It was love for the Church and obedience to Paul's command that all things be done for edification and in good order (1 Corinthians 14:26, 40).

The Rise of Modern Charismatic Tongues

Modern Pentecostal theology regularly recognizes that the contemporary revival was not an unprecedented continuation of historic Christian practice. Rather, it developed through a series of theological and revivalist movements that increasingly emphasized distinct spiritual experiences, eventually identifying tongues as a defining sign of Spirit empowerment.

Tracing this progression helps explain how tongues moved from a peripheral gift in Scripture and church history to a central marker in modern Pentecostalism.

A. John Wesley (1703-1791)

A Body of Grace Beyond Salvation

John Wesley emphasized the assurance of our salvation, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, and lasting religion. However, he also taught that salvation was not an act of grace and holiness was not a lasting reward, but a process, often referred to as "entire sanctification". Though he never claimed to have made it, he certainly was the first to systematize it, while bringing the concept into mainstream Christianity. He also was the first to teach that a work of grace **should be expected, should be sought after, and was identifiable.**

It is important to note that Wesley did not teach tongues as a normative, nor did he associate speaking in tongues with Spirit baptism or Christian maturity. However, his emphasis on distinct spiritual experiences, following conversion and progress in holiness, both increasingly came to be described as waves of identifiable experiences rather than primarily in terms of ordinary means such as Scripture, sacrament, and discipleship.

Wesley's legal contribution the organization that believers might experience a specifically post-conversion work of the Spirit. That organization later became the theological bridge that others crossed into teaching a distinct Spirit baptism experience, even though Wesley himself remained anchored in sanctification rather than manifestation.

B. Charles Finney (1792-1875)

The Rise of Spirit Baptism

Finney was convinced Spirit in the Second Great Awakening, that his theology and ministry emphasized revival, moral reform, and what he called the **"baptism of the Holy Spirit"**, as an empowerment for holy living and effective witness, not as an experience marked by tongues. He often always gave conversion experiences of the Spirit, but he described it in terms of:

- A powerful sense of God's presence
- Renewed moral resolve and commitment
- Empowerment for evangelism and obedience
- Emotional conviction and spiritual intensity

His accounts include deep weeping, physical weakness, or overwhelming awareness of divine love, but **not glossolalia**. For Finney, the evidence of the Spirit's work was transformed character and effectiveness in revival, not supernatural speech.

Under Finney's influence, emotional intensity and outward manifestations increasingly functioned as confirmation of spiritual activity. This framework contributed over centuries to expect charismatic signs as validation of the Spirit's presence.

Although tongues were not yet central to Finney, Finney's revivalism prepared the Church to **equate visible manifestation with spiritual authenticity**, a key assumption that later allowed tongues to be elevated as **proof of Spirit baptism**.

C. The Holiness Movement (mid-19th century, c. 1840s-1890s)

Spiritual Stages and the Search for Evidential Signs

The Holiness movement developed within Methodism and other Protestant traditions during the nineteenth century. It emphasized Wesley's idea of entire sanctification as a distinct post-conversion experience, often described as a second work of grace.

Over time, sanctification was increasingly framed as a dedicated spiritual moment rather than a gradual process. Once Christian growth was divided into stages, the question naturally followed: how would one know the deeper work of the Spirit has occurred?

While such holiness teachers did not require tongues, the movement's structure made the search for a definitive, observable marker of Spirit empowerment almost inevitable.

D. Charles Parham (1873-1929)

Tongues as the Evidential Sign of Spirit Baptism

In the early twentieth century, Charles Parham brought tongues to doctrine theological shift that gave birth to modern Pentecostalism. In 1901, at his Bible school in Topeka, Kansas, **Parham taught that speaking in tongues was the initial physical evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit.**

This doctrine marked a radical change:

- Tongues moved from a **possible gift** to **a required sign**
- Spirit baptism was separated from conversion
- A single manifestation became the universal proof of empowerment

This teaching provided a clear, measurable indicator that satisfied the holiness movement's demand for evidential confirmation. However, his doctrine had no theological precedent in Scripture. It was a doctrine that grew in the nineteenth century.

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F. William J. Seymour (1870-1922) and the Azusa Street Revival (1906-1909)

The Normalization of Tongues

The Azusa Street Revival, which began in 1906, brought Parham's teaching to a broader Christian audience. Under William Seymour's leadership, **speaking in tongues became common, expected, and celebrated** as evidence of Spirit baptism.

At Azusa Street:

- Tongues were normalized as a central spiritual experience
- Expectation spread discretely
- Theological reflection followed experience rather than preceding it

From this moment forward, tongues were no longer peripheral. They became a defining feature of Pentecostal identity and practice. New denominations emerged from this revival and institutionalized the combination of formal orthodox written doctrine theology, worship, and discipleship structures.

G. From Pentecostalism to Modern Revivalism (mid-20th century to present)

Tongues as Marker of Spiritual Vitality

Later movements, including the Charismatic Renewal (1960s-1970s), the Third Wave (1980s-1990s), and contemporary Asian charismatic expansions (1990s-present), inherited Pentecostal assumptions about tongues even when modifying formal doctrine.

In many of these movements:

- Tongues are treated as normative
- Tongues function as evidence of spiritual vitality
- Tongues are encouraged as a devotional or prayer practice
- Tongues are associated with deeper intimacy or power

While not all charismatic traditions formally affirm initial evidence doctrine, many still functionally elevate tongues as a potential or defining expression of the Spirit's work.

H. Taxonomy of the Tongues-Centered Pentecostalism

In simplified form, the historical development unfolds as follows:

- A sacred mark of grace/signs from adventist/sanctified revivalism (Wesley, Finney)
- Visible manifestation stated as proof of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Finney, 1890s)
- Post-conversion stages demand confirmation (Holiness Movement, 1890s)
- Tongues identified as required evidence (Parham, 1901)
- Tongues normalized and institutionalized (Azusa Street, 1906-1909)
- Tongues elevated as marker of spiritual vitality and maturity (Modern revivalism, 20th-21st century)

This progression explains why tongues occupy a central place in modern Pentecostalism, despite remaining peripheral and carefully regulated in Scripture. As such Church, and other denominations.

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VI

Tongues in Mainstream Christianity Today

A. Cessationist traditions

Many Reformed, Presbyterian, and some Baptist and evangelical churches hold that tongues ceased with the apostolic era. While they affirm that God can act supernaturally, tongues are not expected or practiced, and in extreme circles seen as a work of the devil at worst or at best a sign of the flesh.

B. Cautious continuationist traditions

Many continuationist evangelicals affirm that tongues do occur today but are not central, not universal, and must operate under biblical governance. This view affirms the Spirit's work while emphasizing order and edification.

C. Classical Pentecostal traditions

Many Pentecostal traditions teach that tongues are the initial evidence of Spirit baptism. This often creates categories of believers that Scripture does not create, and it can unintentionally imply that those without tongues lack fullness of the Spirit.

D. Hyper-charismatic movements

Hyper-charismatic expressions often go beyond biblical boundaries by:

- Encouraging unregulated public tongues
- Pressuring believers to speak in tongues
- Treating tongues as proof of spiritual authority or maturity
- Using tongues as a tool of emotional manipulation
- Allowing tongues to shape theology, direction, and leadership credibility

VII

The Position of Legacy Church

Legacy Church affirms a continuationist understanding of tongues while maintaining clear biblical boundaries. We are best described as cautious continuationists.

We Believe

- Tongues are a genuine spiritual gift given by the Holy Spirit
- Tongues are not given to all believers
- Tongues are not evidence of salvation or Spirit baptism
- Tongues are not a measure of spiritual maturity
- Tongues must never supersede Scripture in authority
- Public use of tongues requires interpretation and order
- A private, prayer oriented use of tongues does exist, but Scripture does not command it, emphasize it, or treat it as normative

We aim to be a church known by our spiritual fruit, biblical literacy, and love for the community before we are known for our giftings.

We Reject

Legacy Church explicitly rejects:

- The belief that all believers should speak in tongues
- The teaching that tongues are the initial evidence of Spirit baptism
- Any pressure, coercion, or imitation surrounding tongues
- Public tongues without interpretation
- Elevating tongues above love, clarity, or Scripture
- Using tongues to establish spiritual superiority or leadership credibility
- Any practice that produces disorder, division, confusion, or fear

VIII

Practical Governance of Tongues at Legacy Church

Clarity protects unity. Governance honors the Spirit rather than quenching Him.

In Sunday gatherings

Our gatherings prioritize intelligible worship and teaching

All prayers, songs, and teaching in our services are offered in language that can be clearly understood by the congregation, so that all may be built up together.

Tongues are not practiced as a public element of our services

We do not include public expressions of tongues during our Sunday gatherings, as our aim is to maintain clarity, unity, and shared participation in worship. **At the same time, if an individual practices praying in tongues privately during a service, that is welcomed and encouraged when it draws them closer to the Lord.** We simply ask that such prayer remain quiet and personal, so as not to distract or cause confusion for those around them who may be unfamiliar with the gift or unsure of its purpose.

Worship and teaching from the platform are always understandable

Those leading from the platform communicate in ways that invite the entire church into worship and instruction without confusion or distraction.

We do not structure services around spontaneous tongues and interpretation

Our services are intentionally ordered and planned to encourage Scripture-shaped worship rather than spontaneous manifestations that may divide or confuse.

There is no expectation or pressure to speak in tongues

Tongues are neither encouraged nor discouraged as a personal practice, and they are never treated as a sign of spiritual maturity, fullness of the Spirit, or deeper faith. As we teach through the Scriptures week by week, this subject will naturally arise, and when it does, we will openly affirm the gift of tongues as a genuine work of the Holy Spirit, while also teaching clearly and carefully about its biblical purpose and proper place within the life of the Church.

In small groups and discipleship settings

We prioritize intelligible prayer and Scripture

Small group prayer should build up the group and remain clear and understandable.

Tongues are not forbidden, but they are governed

Any private practice should remain private and should not disrupt the group or create division.

Pastoral involvement if confusion arises

If tongues become a point of pressure, pride, fear, or disorder, leaders will address it and bring the conversation back under Scripture.

Pastoral principles

The fruit of the Spirit matters more than any gift

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control are the marks of maturity.

Gifts are for service, not status

Spiritual gifts are given for the building up of others, not for personal platform or identity.

All things must build up the church

If a practice produces confusion, division, or self focus, it violates Paul's instructions.

Conclusion

Tongues are a real gift of the Holy Spirit, but they are not the goal of the Christian life. Scripture consistently points the Church toward love, holiness, clarity, and order as the marks of spiritual maturity. Tongues may occur, and when they do, they must be governed by Scripture and handled with humility.

Legacy Church seeks to be a Spirit-empowered, Spirit-led church grounded in truth. We honor the Spirit by submitting to the Word, pursuing clarity over confusion, and valuing love over all gifts. We are not anti tongues. We are pro Scripture, pro edification, and pro peace in the body of Christ.

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