

# The Gift of Tongues

*A Position Paper of Legacy Church*

*\*Our official position on the gift of tongues, as well as our governance of that gift can be found on pages 10-12.*

## Introduction

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 careful boundaries around their purpose and practice. Much of the modern controversy is not caused by the existence of the gift, but by the elevation of tongues beyond what Scripture teaches, and by the lack of governance where Scripture insists on order.

At Legacy Church are *continuationists*. We affirm the Holy Spirit's freedom and desire to distribute gifts as He wills, and we gladly acknowledge that tongues may occur today. At the same time, we refuse to treat tongues as central, normative, universal, or necessary for salvation or spiritual maturity. Our aim is to honor the Spirit by submitting our doctrine and practice to the authority of Scripture, for the peace, clarity, and edification of the church.

## I. Tongues in the New Testament

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

### A. Tongues in Acts 2: Known, intelligible human languages

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

“How is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?” (Acts 2:8)

Purpose and function in Acts 2:

1. A public, intelligible sign that the Holy Spirit had been poured out
2. A missional proclamation of the mighty works of God to the nations
3. A confirmation of the gospel's expansion beyond ethnic Israel
4. A visible reversal of Babel as the nations are gathered through Christ

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

## B. Tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14: Unintelligible without interpretation

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

“One who 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:

1. Tongues require interpretation to edify the church
2. Without interpretation, tongues are inappropriate for public worship
3. Tongues are one gift among many and are not superior to other gifts
4. Tongues are explicitly *not* universal

Paul’s repeated concern is edification, not expression.

### What is the purpose of this type of tongues?

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

Paul teaches that gifts are given “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). Tongues, when uninterpreted, do not serve that purpose in the gathered church. When interpreted, tongues can function as edifying speech. This is why Paul says the tongue speaker should pray for interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:13). Tongues are incomplete in corporate worship without interpretation.

Paul also frames tongues as a sign (1 Corinthians 14:22). Yet he immediately warns that uninterpreted tongues can confuse outsiders and undermine our witness (1 Corinthians 14:23). This reinforces that tongues are not meant to dominate the assembly. They are to be practiced with restraint, clarity, and order.

## C. The Question of a Prayer Oriented Use of Tongues

Some infer from Paul’s teaching that tongues may function privately in prayer. Paul speaks of praying with the spirit as well as with the mind.

“If I pray in a tongue, 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.” (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 rejection.**

### What is the purpose of this type of tongues?

If a private, prayer oriented use of tongues exists, its purpose is limited to personal prayer directed toward God. It is not revelation, 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 that as a model for corporate worship. Paul’s governing principle remains edification of the body.

### How should it operate?



1. **Privately, not publicly**  
If there is no interpretation, Paul instructs the speaker to be silent in the church and speak to himself and to God (1 Corinthians 14:28). This places any prayer oriented use of tongues outside the public gathering.
2. **Humbly, not prescriptively**  
Because Scripture never commands believers to seek this practice, it must never be taught as necessary, superior, or expected.
3. **Subordinate to Scripture and intelligible prayer**  
Paul insists he will pray with the mind also (1 Corinthians 14:15). Intelligible prayer remains primary. Any private practice must remain secondary.
4. **Producing fruit, not pride**  
Any practice that cultivates spiritual pride, creates division, or elevates experience above Scripture violates the Spirit's purpose and the Bible's command.

## II. Paul's Clarifications and a Common Objection

There is a common argument made from Paul's own words. The argument goes something like this, "Paul implies that everyone should speak in tongues, and that it 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 of you." (1 Corinthians 14:18)

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

### A. Paul's wish is pastoral, not prescriptive

Paul expresses personal desires elsewhere that are clearly not commands, such as wishing all believers were single like he was (1 Corinthians 7:7). Yet no one is preaching that every Christian should be single. A pastoral desire does not create a universal requirement.

### 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 divided into spiritual classes based on whether they have this 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.

### III. 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 we do also hear many brethren in the Church who possess 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 hierarchy of gifts is established
- No expectation is placed on believers to speak in tongues
- No doctrine of initial evidence is present
- Tongues are never used to define orthodoxy or spirituality

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

#### B. Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD)

Tertullian is significant in determining our thoughts on tongues, not because he gave detailed instruction on *glossolalia* (tongues), but it comes from his proximity to the earliest charismatic controversy in church history.

In the late second century, the Montanist movement emerged, marked by ecstatic speech, spontaneous prophetic utterances, and claims of direct inspiration by the Spirit that functioned alongside, and at times above, apostolic teaching. While Montanist speech was primarily prophetic rather than linguistic, it shared key characteristics with later abuses of tongues, namely unregulated utterance, appeal to immediate spiritual inspiration, and disruption of ecclesial order.

In his earlier orthodox writings, Tertullian insists that all claims of spiritual activity must be governed by the apostolic rule of faith. In *Prescription Against Heretics* 6, he writes:

“From what and through whom and when and to whom has been handed down that rule, by which men become Christians? ... For wherever it shall be manifest that the true Christian rule and faith are, there will likewise be the true Scriptures and interpretations thereof.”



**In other words**, any claim to spiritual authority must be tested by whether it aligns with the apostolic faith and the Scriptures, rather than being 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 speech, including ecstatic utterance, could operate independently of Scripture and the apostolic authority of the Scriptures.

The Montanist controversy demonstrates that the early Church learned quickly that ungoverned spiritual enthusiasm (even when sincere) leads to division and doctrinal instability rather than edification. This historical moment shaped the Church's lasting instinct to regulate all forms of charismatic speech, including tongues, by Scripture, order, and ecclesial oversight.

Though we want 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 showed no anxiety about their decline.

Origen (c. 185-254 AD), in *Against Celsus* 2.8, acknowledges that miraculous signs were more prominent during the Church's early expansion and less common in his own day. Importantly, he presents this as **normal**, not as spiritual loss.

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

“In the earliest times, ‘the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spake with tongues,’ which they had not learned, ‘as the Spirit gave them utterance.’ These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. 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 an enduring norm for Christian devotion.

### Early Church pattern

Across the patristic era, the pattern is consistent:

- Tongues are affirmed as real where they appear
- Tongues are never treated as central
- 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.



## IV. 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 *Schwärmerei* (enthusiasm), spiritual movements that claimed direct revelation or spiritual experience apart from the Word of God.

In *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, Luther writes:

“For God does not want to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from the Word and Sacraments is of the devil.”

Luther’s concern was pastoral. Experiences detached from Scripture undermine assurance and open 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 expansion.

In his *Commentary on Acts 2:4*, Calvin writes:

“This was a temporary gift, which served to adorn the Gospel for a time... For it was expedient that the Gospel should be thus magnificently furnished with miracles at 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 governing principle remains deeply biblical: God’s Word must be clear, intelligible, and central in the life of the Church.

### Reformed Instinct

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)

## V. The Rise of Modern Charismatic Tongues

Modern Pentecostal theology regarding tongues did not arise suddenly, nor does it reflect an uninterrupted 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 Work of Grace Beyond Salvation

John Wesley emphasized the assurance of our salvation, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, and heartfelt religion. However, he also taught that salvation was one act of grace and believers were to look for a second act of grace, often referred to as “entire sanctification”. Though he wasn't the first to teach this, he certainly was the first to systematize it, while bringing the concept to mainstream Christianity. His idea was that this second 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 normative, nor did he associate speaking in tongues with Spirit baptism or Christian maturity. However, his emphasis on distinct spiritual experiences *following* conversion laid important groundwork. Faith increasingly came to be described in terms of identifiable experiences rather than primarily in terms of ordinary means such as Scripture, sacrament, and discipleship.

Wesley helped normalize the expectation that believers might experience a profound post-conversion work of the Spirit. That expectation 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 a central figure in the Second Great Awakening, but 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 ministry, not as an experience marked by tongues. He often wrote about a post-conversion experience of the Spirit, but he described it in terms of:

- A powerful sense of God’s presence
- Renewed moral resolve and consecration
- 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 conditioned later revival movements to expect observable signs as validation of the Spirit’s presence.

Although tongues were not yet in view, 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. 1830s-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 definable spiritual moments rather than a gradual process. Once Christian growth was divided into stages, the question naturally followed: how can one know that this deeper work of the Spirit has occurred?

While early 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 Initial Evidence of Spirit Baptism

In the early twentieth century, Charles Parham brought upon a decisive 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 widespread precedent in historic Christian theology prior to the twentieth century.

## E. 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 theology into global prominence. 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 replaced discretion
- 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 doctrine of initial evidence within their theology, worship, and discipleship structures.



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

### Tongues as a Marker of Spiritual Vitality

Later movements, including the Charismatic Renewal (1960s-1970s), the Third Wave (1980s-1990s), and contemporary hyper-charismatic expressions (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 theology, many still functionally elevate tongues as a preferred or defining expression of the Spirit's work.

## G. Summary of the Tongues-Centered Progression

In simplified form, the historical development unfolds as follows:

1. A second work of grace (apart from salvation) emphasized without tongues (Wesley, 1700s)
2. Visible manifestations valued as proof of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Finney, 1800s)
3. Post-conversion stages demand confirmation (Holiness Movement, 1800s)
4. Tongues identified as required evidence (Parham, 1901)
5. Tongues normalized and institutionalized (Azusa Street, 1906-1909)
6. Tongues elevated as markers 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, the early Church, and other denominations.

# 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:

1. Encouraging unregulated public tongues
2. Pressuring believers to speak in tongues
3. Treating tongues as proof of spiritual authority or maturity
4. Using tongues as a tool of emotional manipulation
5. 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

1. Tongues are a genuine spiritual gift given by the Holy Spirit
2. Tongues are not given to all believers
3. Tongues are not evidence of salvation or Spirit baptism
4. Tongues are not a measure of spiritual maturity
5. Tongues must never supersede Scripture in authority
6. Public use of tongues requires interpretation and order
7. 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:

1. The belief that all believers should speak in tongues
2. The teaching that tongues are the initial evidence of Spirit baptism
3. Any pressure, coercion, or imitation surrounding tongues
4. Public tongues without interpretation
5. Elevating tongues above love, clarity, or Scripture
6. Using tongues to establish spiritual superiority or leadership credibility
7. 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.

### A. In Sunday gatherings

1. **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.

2. **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.

3. **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.

4. **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.

5. **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.

### B. In small groups and discipleship settings

1. We prioritize intelligible prayer and Scripture

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

2. Tongues are not forbidden, but they are governed

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

3. 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.



## C. Pastoral principles

1. 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.
2. Gifts are for service, not status  
Spiritual gifts are given for the building up of others, not for personal platform or identity.
3. 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.

Soli Deo Gloria.

