

**Spiritual Gifts and the Primordial Language:**

*A Study of Continuation, Cessation, and Early Church Perspectives*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theological debate over the continuation or cessation of spiritual gifts, emphasizing how the early church fathers viewed the role of gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and healing. By invoking the concept of Hebrew as the primordial language of divine communication, the study highlights the reverence and order applied to spiritual gifts in the early church and offers a guide for the modern church to avoid the extremes of both cessationism and charismatic excess. Using *Prima Scriptura* as the foundational framework, the study concludes by advocating for the continuation of spiritual gifts rooted in biblical order and sacredness, reflecting the balance seen in the early church's reverence for divine communication. Scripture is treated as the highest authority, while historical examples act as valuable guardrails, ensuring doctrinal fidelity without compromising God's sovereignty.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 45.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The debate over the continuation or cessation of spiritual gifts—such as prophecy, tongues, and healing—has been a contentious issue throughout Christian history. The question of whether these gifts were intended only for the apostolic age or if they continue to function in the church today shapes much of the modern theological landscape, especially among Pentecostal, charismatic, and cessationist traditions. This paper approaches the issue from a *Prima Scriptura* standpoint, where Scripture serves as the ultimate authority but is interpreted in conjunction with historical examples from the early church, reason, and experience.<sup>2</sup>

A key argument in favor of ecstatic, unintelligible tongues in modern charismatic movements comes from the interpretation of Paul's reference to the '*tongues of angels*' in 1 Corinthians 13:1. Proponents of this view argue that because '*tongues of angels*' is not an earthly language, the practice of what might be called '*glossolalia*' is justified. However, this paper challenges that interpretation by presenting the early church's approach to divine communication through the concept of Hebrew as the primordial language, which was treated with sacredness and clarity.<sup>3</sup>

By examining early church perspectives on spiritual gifts, particularly through the lens of church fathers such as Origen, Jerome, and Ephrem the Syrian, this study seeks to uncover how spiritual gifts were seen as sacred, reverent tools for divine communication. The sacredness of Hebrew as the primordial language serves as a metaphor for how gifts

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<sup>2</sup> Michael L. Brown, *Authentic Fire: A Response to John MacArthur's Strange Fire* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2014), 72.

<sup>3</sup> Paul, 1 Cor. 13:1, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

like tongues should be practiced—with order, reverence, and intelligibility. While modern perspectives from *Strange Fire* by John MacArthur and *Authentic Fire* by Michael Brown provide insight into contemporary debates, this paper prioritizes the early church as a guide, preventing both theological novelty and potential misinterpretation.<sup>4</sup> We will also explore the dangers of Sola Scriptura without the appropriate guardrails of tradition, reason, and history, leading to both theological isolation and abuses.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, this study advocates for the continuation of spiritual gifts, grounded in the sacredness, order, and biblical discernment seen in the early church. This approach aligns with the Prima Scriptura framework, which holds that while God’s actions are not bound by human tradition, historical church practices offer essential boundaries to protect against theological errors.<sup>6</sup>

## II. EARLY CHURCH PERSPECTIVES ON SPIRITUAL GIFTS

The Early Church and Divine Communication: The early church fathers viewed spiritual gifts as sacred instruments of divine communication. Figures such as Origen, Jerome, and Ephrem the Syrian were deeply influenced by the belief that these gifts—prophecy, tongues, healing—were not merely extraordinary phenomena but tangible

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<sup>4</sup> Origen, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), 101.

<sup>6</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis*, trans. Edward G. Mathews Jr. and Joseph P. Amar (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 88.

manifestations of God's active presence in the life of the church.<sup>7</sup> Spiritual gifts were believed to play a role in both personal sanctification and communal edification.<sup>8</sup>

Origen, in his *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, reflected on spiritual gifts as the means through which divine wisdom was communicated to the church, emphasizing that the proper use of these gifts was a responsibility, not an opportunity for personal glorification.<sup>9</sup> Jerome shared this view, describing the gifts as part of the work of the Holy Spirit in equipping the church to fulfill its mission, while also warning that the misuse of these gifts could lead to disorder and division within the body.<sup>10</sup> Both saw the gifts as deeply tied to edifying the church rather than serving individual, private purposes.<sup>11</sup>

Ephrem the Syrian, in his commentaries, highlighted the practical function of spiritual gifts as extensions of God's wisdom and truth.<sup>12</sup> In his writings, Ephrem noted that prophecy and tongues were vital for instructing the faithful and guiding the church toward greater maturity in Christ.<sup>13</sup> These early theologians consistently warned that the

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<sup>7</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, trans. Talbot W. Chambers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 123.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 405.

<sup>9</sup> B.B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1918), 89.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:14.5.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 92.

<sup>12</sup> John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, trans. Graham Neville (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 121.

<sup>13</sup> Jerome, *Letters*, trans. F.A. Wright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 65.

gifts, if misused or misunderstood, could become a source of confusion and disunity, which directly opposed their intended purpose of building up the body of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Hebrew as the Primordial Language: The concept of Hebrew as the primordial language—the original means by which God communicated with humanity—has its roots in early Christian tradition, Jewish intertestamental writings, and rabbinic thought.<sup>15</sup> Writers such as Origen and Jerome believed that Hebrew was the language used by Adam and the patriarchs to converse with God. It was seen as the sacred language of divine truth, a pure form of communication that was uncorrupted by human error or disobedience.<sup>16</sup>

This reverence for Hebrew as the sacred language provides a metaphor for understanding how the early church viewed spiritual gifts like prophecy and tongues. Just as Hebrew was treated with the utmost respect as the language of divine revelation, spiritual gifts were to be handled with reverence, caution, and a commitment to conveying God’s truth in a way that aligned with His will.<sup>17</sup> For early church thinkers, spiritual gifts were not to be used for self-promotion or personal spiritual experiences; they were sacred means of divine communication, to be employed only in ways that reflected God’s holiness and purpose for the church.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 154.

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 3.17.3.

<sup>16</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (New York: Christian Heritage, 1948), 112.

<sup>17</sup> David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 54.

<sup>18</sup> Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 42.

This understanding of the sacredness of language and communication offers a model for how the modern church should approach spiritual gifts today—with a focus on edification, order, and submission to God’s authority.<sup>19</sup> Even if ‘*tongues of angels*’ were not earthly languages, the early church consistently emphasized clarity and edification in the use of all gifts.<sup>20</sup> The modern justification of unintelligible ‘*glossolalia*’ tongues practices seems disconnected from the early church’s model of sacred, intelligible divine communication.<sup>21</sup> Based on early tradition, Hebrew was regarded as the language of angels in their corporeal form when they interacted with humanity.<sup>22</sup> When angels were not bound by earthly constraints, language was seen as at will, used to perfectly convey God’s message to His creation, transcending human language but always with the intent to be understood.<sup>23</sup>

The sacredness and purpose of language in the early church show that communication, even supernatural communication, was never random or for personal gain.<sup>24</sup> The model provided by the early church on tongues and prophecy stands in sharp

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), II-II, Q. 171.

<sup>20</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 2:915.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 138.

<sup>22</sup> Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Anthony C. Meisel and M.L. del Mastro (New York: Image Books, 1975), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 7.25.

<sup>24</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 239.

contrast to some of the modern practices where spiritual gifts seem disconnected from their original scriptural and ecclesiastical purpose.<sup>25</sup>

### III. KEY BIBLICAL PASSAGES: AN EARLY CHURCH INTERPRETATION

1 Corinthians 12-14: Sacredness and Order: Paul's extensive discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is foundational for understanding how gifts such as prophecy, healing, and tongues should function within the church. In these chapters, Paul outlines the diverse ways in which the Holy Spirit manifests through believers for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7).<sup>26</sup> He emphasizes that each gift has a purpose within the broader body of Christ, but that purpose is always tied to edification, unity, and order.<sup>27</sup>

Early church fathers like John Chrysostom and Augustine stressed that the gifts must be practiced with reverence and caution. Chrysostom, in particular, warned against the use of spiritual gifts for personal glorification, arguing that such practices detracted from the ultimate goal of edifying the church and promoting unity.<sup>28</sup> In his *Homilies on First Corinthians*, Chrysostom interprets Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 13:1 about the 'tongues of angels' as a rhetorical device rather than an endorsement of ecstatic speech.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 295.

<sup>26</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 5.7.6.

<sup>27</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on the Nativity*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 78.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Paul, 1 Cor. 13:1-2, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.



For Chrysostom, Paul's reference to '*tongues of angels*' was an exaggerated contrast used to stress that even the most exalted spiritual gift, when practiced without love, was worthless.<sup>30</sup>

This understanding of Paul's teaching on tongues and other gifts serves as a powerful reminder that gifts must always be exercised in the context of love, humility, and communal edification. Spiritual gifts are not personal spiritual experiences to be displayed but sacred means of building up the body of Christ.<sup>31</sup>

Paul's guidance in 1 Corinthians 14 further underscores the corporate purpose of spiritual gifts. His insistence that tongues be interpreted (14:5, 13, 27–28) and his concern that unintelligible speech might confuse outsiders (14:23) point to a public assembly, not a private practice. The directive that 'all things be done for building up' (14:26) reflects the early church's understanding, echoed by figures like Chrysostom, that gifts were sacred means to strengthen the body of Christ. This corporate focus contrasts with modern interpretations of tongues as a personal prayer language, suggesting instead that their proper use mirrors the clarity and reverence of the primordial language, serving the community's edification.

1 Corinthians 13:8-10: '*When the Perfect Comes*': Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 that '*prophecies will cease, tongues will be stilled, and knowledge will pass away*' when '*the perfect comes*' has been a key text in the cessationist-continualist debate. Cessationists often interpret '*the perfect*' as referring to the

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<sup>30</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 619.

<sup>31</sup> D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1987), 98.

completion of the biblical canon, suggesting that once the Scriptures were complete, there was no longer a need for gifts like prophecy and tongues.<sup>32</sup>

However, early church commentators did not share this view. Jerome, for example, interpreted ‘*the perfect*’ as referring to the eschatological return of Christ.<sup>33</sup> Jerome argued that spiritual gifts would continue until the church reached its full maturity in Christ, which would occur only at the final consummation of all things.<sup>34</sup> Until that time, the church would continue to rely on spiritual gifts as a means of edification and guidance.<sup>35</sup>

This early church understanding of ‘*the perfect*’ as the future return of Christ, rather than the closing of the canon, provides a robust theological foundation for the continuation of spiritual gifts today. As long as the church remains on earth, still awaiting its full realization in Christ, spiritual gifts will be necessary for its growth and maturity.<sup>36</sup>

Ephesians 4:11-13: Gifts for Maturity: In Ephesians 4:11-13, Paul lists spiritual gifts—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—as essential for equipping the saints and building up the body of Christ.<sup>37</sup> According to Paul, these gifts will continue to be necessary “*until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the*

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<sup>32</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 112.

<sup>33</sup> Jerome, *Letters*, trans. F.A. Wright, 98

<sup>34</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, trans. J.B. Morris and W.H. Simcox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1851), 128.

<sup>35</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 2:144.

<sup>36</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Andrew Cain (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 45.

<sup>37</sup> Paul, Eph. 4:11-13, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

*Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*<sup>38</sup>

Early church fathers saw this passage as a clear affirmation of the continuation of spiritual gifts. Ephrem the Syrian, in particular, viewed these gifts as vital tools for the church's growth toward maturity, reflecting the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in guiding and equipping the church for its mission.<sup>39</sup> For Ephrem, the gifts of the Spirit were not temporary provisions for the apostolic age, but permanent means by which the church would be built up and strengthened until the final return of Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Acts of the Apostles: Tongues as Restored Divine Communication: The events of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2, marked the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the empowerment of the apostles to speak in tongues.<sup>41</sup> The early church saw this event as a reversal of the confusion of languages at Babel, where God had scattered the nations by confusing their speech. At Pentecost, the gift of tongues symbolized the restoration of divine communication, where the apostles were able to speak in known languages so that the gospel could be understood by people from all nations.<sup>42</sup>

For early church fathers like Origen and Chrysostom, tongues were seen not as ecstatic, unintelligible speech but as the miraculous ability to speak in languages that

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<sup>38</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1961), 83.

<sup>39</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 67.

<sup>40</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Acts of the Apostles*, trans. J. Walker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1852), 128.

<sup>41</sup> Paul, Acts 2:1-4, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

<sup>42</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, trans. E.W. Watson (London: S.P.C.K., 1886), 15.

others could understand.<sup>43</sup> This view contrasts sharply with some modern charismatic practices, where tongues are often presented as an unintelligible, private prayer language.<sup>44</sup> The early church emphasized that tongues, like all spiritual gifts, were meant to edify the church and convey divine truth in a way that could be understood and acted upon by the wider community.<sup>45</sup>

#### **IV. The Pentecostal Claim of a Heavenly Prayer Language**

##### **A Biblical Basis for the Claim**

Pentecostal theology often cites passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:2, where Paul states that “*the one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.*” This is interpreted by some as evidence for a heavenly prayer language, distinct from the intelligible tongues seen in Acts 2. The phrase ‘*tongues of angels*’ in 1 Corinthians 13:1 is often employed to suggest that tongues can include non-earthly languages used for private prayer and worship.<sup>46</sup>

The early church fathers, while affirming the miraculous nature of tongues, consistently emphasized the importance of intelligibility and edification in their use. Figures such as Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine did not distinguish between public and private uses of tongues in terms of their nature as languages. They viewed tongues primarily as intelligible speech, whether in the form of prophecy or evangelism, to communicate God’s truth to others.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Acts of the Apostles*, 129.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 140.

<sup>45</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God*, 297.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Brown, *Authentic Fire*, 176–180.

<sup>47</sup> Origen, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, 79.

John Chrysostom, in his *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, offers a particularly clarifying perspective on Paul's mention of "*tongues of angels*." Far from interpreting this phrase as a reference to a literal heavenly language, Chrysostom understood it as rhetorical exaggeration—a device used by Paul to highlight the superiority of love over even the most dramatic spiritual gifts.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Chrysostom warned against any practice that lacked intelligibility. Even if one were to assume that angelic languages existed, he argued, their use without edification would run contrary to the order God established within the church.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, Ephrem the Syrian, in his reflections on the Pentecost event described in Acts 2, interpreted the gift of tongues as a redemptive reversal of Babel. He viewed this outpouring not as a display of ecstatic, unintelligible speech but as a moment of divine clarity and unity, where the gospel was made understandable to every listener in their native language. His writings contain no reference to a mystical or private use of tongues, which suggests that such a concept was either absent from early Christian consciousness or, at the very least, not emphasized.<sup>50</sup>

This impression is reinforced by the silence of the *Didache*, one of the earliest Christian manuals of church instruction. While it exhorts believers to worship "*in Spirit and in truth*," it makes no mention of ecstatic or private tongues. The absence of such practices in both doctrinal and liturgical guidance from this period implies that the kind

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<sup>48</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, 13:1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 13:2.

<sup>50</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, 6:3.

of glossolalia found in many contemporary charismatic settings was either unknown to the early church or not seen as an authentic expression of the spiritual gift.<sup>51</sup>

The claim that believers today should expect a private, heavenly prayer language must therefore be examined in light of both Scripture and tradition. The phrase “*tongues of angels*” (1 Corinthians 13:1) is best interpreted as a figure of speech rather than a doctrinal statement. Throughout the Bible, when angels speak—whether to Abraham (Genesis 18) or to Mary (Luke 1:26–38)—they do so in ordinary human language. Nowhere in Scripture is angelic communication depicted as unintelligible. This challenges the Pentecostal assertion that such speech is heavenly and beyond human comprehension.

Paul’s corrective teaching in 1 Corinthians 14 further emphasizes this point. In verses 9 through 19, Paul argues that for tongues to benefit the church, they must be intelligible or interpreted. Even in personal prayer, understanding is essential. Paul does not promote private tongues as a higher spiritual practice; instead, he is concerned with clarity, mutual edification, and order. His instruction to pray “*with the spirit*” and “*with the mind also*” (v.15) insists on the union of spiritual fervor and mental engagement.<sup>52</sup>

Though some may appeal to 1 Corinthians 14:4, where Paul acknowledges that one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, this statement must be read within its broader context. Paul’s overarching concern is not private edification, but the edification of the entire church. In fact, the Corinthian believers were frequently rebuked for their misuse

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<sup>51</sup> *Didache* 10:1–3, in *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume 1: I Clement, II Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Didache*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 417–419.

<sup>52</sup> D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 116.

of spiritual gifts, often engaging in displays that elevated personal experience above communal benefit. Paul's exhortation to pursue gifts that build up the church (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:12, 26) reflects the early church's consistent teaching: spiritual gifts are not for personal status or isolated experience but for the strengthening of the body of Christ.<sup>53</sup>

In light of these considerations, the notion of an unintelligible, private prayer language stands on shaky exegetical and historical ground. The early church's emphasis on intelligibility, clarity, and edification leaves little room for the modern glossolalic practices that claim biblical authority yet bear little resemblance to the gifts described in Scripture or practiced by the earliest followers of Christ.

## **B Implications for Modern Practice**

The claim of a heavenly prayer language, while well-intentioned, raises concerns when weighed against the biblical and historical emphasis on clarity, sacredness, and order. While private prayer in tongues may provide personal spiritual benefit, the early church model discourages practices that lack intelligibility or communal value.<sup>54</sup>

The metaphor of Hebrew as the primordial language, highlighted earlier in this paper, offers a helpful corrective. Just as Hebrew was treated with reverence and clarity, spiritual gifts—whether prophecy, tongues, or healing—should be used in ways that reflect God's holiness and purpose.<sup>55</sup> The modern Pentecostal emphasis on private,

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<sup>53</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 10:6.

<sup>54</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 683–686.

<sup>55</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians*, 3:12.

ecstatic experiences risks diverging from the sacred, communal focus modeled by the early church.<sup>56</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The practice of a heavenly prayer language, as advocated by some Pentecostals, represents a departure from the early church's understanding of tongues as intelligible, sacred communication. While Scripture does not explicitly forbid private prayer in tongues, it consistently upholds the principles of clarity, edification, and order. Modern charismatic movements would do well to align their practices with the early church's model, ensuring that all expressions of spiritual gifts glorify God and edify His people.<sup>57</sup>

### **C The Existence of Counterfeits Implies the Genuine**

A compelling argument for the continuation of spiritual gifts lies in the principle that counterfeits only exist because there is something genuine to mimic. Biblically, we see this pattern repeatedly: false prophets arise to distort the truth proclaimed by God's true prophets (Jeremiah 23:16-17), and counterfeit miracles are performed to distract from God's authentic works (Exodus 7:10-12; Matthew 24:24). In every case, the counterfeit derives its meaning and purpose from the existence of the original.

This logic applies to spiritual gifts. If counterfeit forms of tongues, prophecy, or healing are observed, it strongly suggests the presence of true spiritual gifts. Counterfeits would have no value or purpose if the authentic gifts no longer existed. This perspective aligns with the early church's vigilance in identifying abuses of gifts while affirming

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Brown, *Authentic Fire*, 182.

<sup>57</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, 13:4



their continuation. Figures like Origen and Chrysostom warned against misuses not to deny the gifts but to safeguard their sacredness and integrity.

In modern times, the proliferation of counterfeit practices serves as a reminder to seek and exercise the genuine gifts of the Spirit with reverence, clarity, and alignment with Scripture. Rather than dismissing gifts entirely, the church must discern their true form, ensuring they glorify God and build up the body of Christ.

#### **D      Responding to Common Proof Texts for Glossolalia**

To further discern the true nature of tongues against counterfeit practices, this subsection evaluates specific verses commonly cited to support glossolalia (ecstatic, unintelligible speech or private prayer language). By offering contextual and exegetical responses grounded in Scripture and early church perspectives, these analyses reinforce the need for clarity, edification, and reverence in the use of spiritual gifts, as modeled by the sacredness of the primordial language.

- **Claim: Groaning in the Spirit Equals Tongues (Romans 8:26–27)**

**Verse:** *“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”* (Romans 8:26, ESV)

**Response:** Romans 8:26–27 does not refer to tongues or human utterance. The text describes the Holy Spirit’s intercession as *“groanings too deep for words,”* meaning inexpressible divine communication, not a believer’s speech. Early church fathers like Augustine, in his *Expositions on the Psalms*, viewed this as the Spirit’s work within the believer’s heart, not a vocal gift like tongues. Romans 8 contains no mention of miraculous gifts, and equating these groanings with glossolalia contradicts the text’s

focus on divine, not human, action. The sacredness of divine communication, akin to the primordial language, underscores that such intercession transcends human language.<sup>58</sup>

- **Claim: Private Prayer Language Is Biblical (1 Corinthians 14:2, 14–15)**

**Verses:** “*For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.*” (1 Corinthians 14:2)

“*For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also...*” (1 Corinthians 14:14–15)

**Response:** These verses occur within Paul’s correction of the Corinthians’ misuse of tongues, not an endorsement of private glossolalia. In 14:2, Paul describes the consequence of unintelligible speech—no one understands, so it only “*speaks to God*”—but he does not prescribe this as normative. John Chrysostom, in his *Homilies on First Corinthians*, notes that Paul’s goal is to prioritize intelligibility for communal edification, not to validate private utterance. In 14:14–15, Paul insists on engaging both spirit and mind, rejecting practices that bypass understanding. The early church’s model of sacred communication, like the clarity of the primordial language, demands that tongues serve the church’s edification, not private experience.<sup>59</sup>

- **Claim: Tongues Build Up the Individual Spiritually (1 Corinthians 14:4)**

**Verse:** “*The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.*” (1 Corinthians 14:4)

**Response:** Paul’s statement that tongues “*build up*” the individual is not a commendation but a contrast to prophecy’s superior communal benefit. In a Corinthian

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<sup>58</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, trans. J.E. Tweed (Oxford: Parker, 1847), Psalm 38.13–14.

<sup>59</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, 35:231–232

church marked by pride and division (1 Corinthians 1:10–12; 3:3), self-focused spirituality was problematic. Chrysostom warns in his *Homilies* that gifts must prioritize the church’s unity, not individual gain. The early church’s emphasis on edification aligns with the sacred purpose of divine communication, where gifts, like the primordial language, exist to convey God’s truth clearly to the community.<sup>60</sup>

- **Claim: Tongues Can Be Angelic (1 Corinthians 13:1)**

**Verse:** “*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*” (1 Corinthians 13:1)

**Response:** Paul’s reference to “*tongues of angels*” is hyperbolic, not doctrinal. As Chrysostom explains in his *Homilies on First Corinthians*, Paul uses exaggerated rhetoric to underscore love’s supremacy, similar to “*giving my body to be burned*” (13:3). Scripture consistently depicts angelic communication in human languages (e.g., Genesis 18; Luke 1:26–38), and biblical tongues (Acts 2, 10, 19) are known languages. The early church’s reverence for Hebrew as the primordial language suggests that even angelic speech, when directed to humans, prioritizes clarity and intelligibility, not ecstatic utterance.<sup>61</sup>

- **Claim: Praying in the Spirit Means Tongues (Jude 20)**

**Verse:** “*But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit...*” (Jude 20)

**Response:** Jude 20 contains no reference to tongues. “*Praying in the Holy Spirit*” denotes Spirit-led prayer aligned with God’s will, as seen in Ephesians 6:18. Early church writers like Origen, in *On Prayer*, describe such prayer as sincere and guided by the

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<sup>60</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, 1:10-12, 3:3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 13:1.

Spirit, not ecstatic speech. Reading glossolalia into this verse is eisegesis, disconnected from the text and early church practice. The sacredness of divine communication requires prayer to reflect clarity and purpose, not unintelligible expression.<sup>62</sup>

- **Claim: Tongues Are Uncontrollable (1 Corinthians 14:28)**

**Verse:** “*If there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.*” (1 Corinthians 14:28)

**Response:** Far from supporting uncontrollable tongues, this verse demonstrates Paul’s insistence on self-control. He commands silence unless an interpreter is present, emphasizing order and edification (1 Corinthians 14:40). The early church, as seen in the *Didache*’s call for worship “*in Spirit and truth,*” prioritized disciplined practice. The notion that the Spirit overwhelms the speaker contradicts Paul’s teaching on self-control as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23) and the sacred order of divine communication modeled by the primordial language.<sup>63</sup>

## **Conclusion**

These proof texts, when examined contextually and through the lens of early church interpretation, do not support glossolalia as a private, ecstatic prayer language. The early church’s emphasis on clarity, edification, and reverence—mirrored in the sacredness of the primordial language—corrects modern misinterpretations. Spiritual gifts, including tongues, must align with Scripture’s call for order and communal benefit, ensuring they glorify God and strengthen the church.

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<sup>62</sup> Origen, *On Prayer*, trans. William A. Curtis (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001), chap. 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Didache* 10:1–3, in *The Apostolic Fathers, Volume 1: I Clement, II Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Didache*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library 24 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), chap. 10..

## **V. THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS: CESSATIONISM AND CONTINUATIONISM**

Cessationism vs. Continuationism in Historical Context: Historically, the early church was predominantly continuationist, viewing spiritual gifts as an integral part of the church's life and mission.<sup>64</sup> The cessationist position did not emerge until much later, particularly during the Reformation, when certain Protestant theologians, such as John Calvin and B.B. Warfield, began to argue that the miraculous gifts were no longer necessary following the completion of the biblical canon.<sup>65</sup>

However, early Christian writings overwhelmingly support the continuation of gifts as part of the church's life.<sup>66</sup> The early church saw no clear indication in Scripture that the gifts would cease before Christ's return. On the contrary, the early councils and church fathers defended the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit's gifts, seeing them as essential for maintaining orthodoxy and advancing the church's mission.<sup>67</sup>

## **VI. MODERN IMPLICATIONS: USING THE PRIMORDIAL LANGUAGE AS A GUIDE**

Sacredness in Practice: The early church's reverence for Hebrew as the primordial language offers a model for how the modern church should approach spiritual gifts. Just

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<sup>64</sup> Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 51.

<sup>65</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 204.

<sup>66</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letters*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 103.

<sup>67</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, 5.7.9.

as Hebrew was treated as the sacred language of divine communication, spiritual gifts like prophecy and tongues should be used with the same sense of sacredness and reverence.<sup>68</sup> These gifts are not for personal edification or emotional display but are tools for building up the body of Christ, just as they were understood by the early church.<sup>69</sup>

The metaphor of the primordial language reminds the church that spiritual gifts are ultimately means of sacred, intelligible communication from God, with the purpose of edification.<sup>70</sup> The modern tendency toward emotionalism and unintelligible speech in some charismatic circles must be checked against the model of the early church, where tongues were always linked to communal edification and clarity.<sup>71</sup>

Discernment and Order in the Modern Church: Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14 emphasize that spiritual gifts must be used in a way that edifies the church and reflects God's order.<sup>72</sup> Modern charismatic movements often fall into the error of prioritizing emotional experience over the edification of the church. By returning to the early church's understanding of spiritual gifts as sacred communication, the modern church can avoid the excesses that lead to confusion, disorder, and division.<sup>73</sup>

By using *Prima Scriptura* as a guiding principle, the church can maintain its faithfulness to Scripture while respecting the historical understanding of gifts that serves

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<sup>68</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 182.

<sup>69</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 241.

<sup>70</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 16.

<sup>71</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, 135.

<sup>72</sup> Paul, 1 Cor. 14:1, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*.

<sup>73</sup> Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 43.

as a safeguard.<sup>74</sup> Charismatic movements must discern their practices against the scriptural purpose of gifts, ensuring that they align with the clarity, edification, and sacredness modeled in Scripture and by the early church fathers.<sup>75</sup>

## **VII. CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION**

Early Church as the Guide: This paper has shown that the early church fathers viewed spiritual gifts as sacred, ordered, and integral to the life of the church. Their reverence for Hebrew as the primordial language serves as a helpful guide for how spiritual gifts should be treated today—with caution, reverence, and a focus on edifying the body of Christ.<sup>76</sup> While modern charismatic movements often emphasize emotional experience, the early church provides a model for how spiritual gifts can be practiced in a way that glorifies God and strengthens the church.<sup>77</sup>

Personal Reflection: As *Prima Scriptura* forms the foundation of this study, both cessationism and charismatic excesses can be avoided by following the early church's model.<sup>78</sup> Spiritual gifts continue to have a place in the church today, but they must be practiced within the boundaries of biblical discernment and reverence for divine

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 141.

<sup>75</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G.W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 1.2.9.

<sup>76</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 114.

<sup>77</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God*, 299.

<sup>78</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letters*, 105.

communication.<sup>79</sup> Just as the early church viewed Hebrew as a sacred language, spiritual gifts should be treated as sacred tools for conveying God's truth to His people.<sup>80</sup>

This understanding offers a correction to both cessationism and modern abuses, demonstrating that the gifts can and should continue, but only in a way that honors the sacredness, clarity, and order seen in both Scripture and the early church's tradition.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 146.

<sup>80</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Acts of the Apostles*, 130.

<sup>81</sup> Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians*, 48.



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