



Research Paper

## Speaking In Tongues among the Nigerian Pentecostals

<sup>1</sup>Rev. Dantani Nuhu, <sup>2</sup>Rev Benjamin Philip Karbon, <sup>3</sup>Habila Katuka  
& <sup>4</sup>Assoc. Prof. Rimamsikwe Habila Kitause

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Department of Religion Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Federal University, Wukari, Taraba State

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, Department of Christian Religious Studies,

Faculty of Arts, Taraba State University, PMB 1167, Jalingo

<sup>3</sup>Lecturer, Department of Christian Religious Studies,

Faculty of Arts, Taraba State University, PMB 1167, Jalingo

<sup>4</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Christian Religious Studies,

Faculty of Arts, Taraba State University, PMB 1167, Jalingo

### Abstract

*Speaking in tongues is a widely disputed topic among theologians and scientists alike. Though glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is central to Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity, it is hotly debated not only among Christians of other denominations, but also within charismatics. This paper adopts historical and analytical approaches in its studies. The study discovered that glossolalia was popular during the Apostolic period of the Christian era which might have been the reasons why St. Paul made several references to it. Speaking in tongues is currently widespread among the Pentecostals in Nigeria, where Christian worship is frequently characterized by it from start to finish. It is equally unraveled that during sermons, ministers and preachers have been heard speaking in tongues as they announce words of knowledge, prophesy, and perform miracles among their congregations. This overt or covert emphasis on speaking in tongues has pitted Christians against one another, just as it did in the days of the Apostles, when it became a source of conflict and division in the church in Corinth, where the congregation was divided between those who could and could not speak in tongues. Those who did not have the gift of languages were scorned as not being true Christians. In some denominations, speaking in tongues is not regarded evidence of being truly born again or being filled with the Holy Spirit. The paper submitted that although speaking in tongues has become a component of the current Christian experience in Nigeria it is not only strictly the preserve of the Pentecostals but the mainliners as well.*

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### I. Introduction

In Christian communities today, the concept of "speaking in tongues" arouses unique emotions. According to Je'adayibe (2014) "speaking in tongues" has a history dating back to the Pentecost experience of the early Church (Acts 2:1), and has become a major area of emphasis today, particularly within the Pentecostal Churches, who see this phenomenon as a way of expressing true baptism of the Spirit and authenticating genuine Christian regeneration. Many people are turning to the Bible and personally experiencing some of the occurrences that distinguished the beginnings of Christianity (Jenkins, 2006). In fact, speaking in tongues has traditionally been cited as "initial evidence" that a person has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Costas, 1983). According to Je'adayibe (2014), while the emphasis on speaking in tongues has remained, a few problems that require Biblical study on Christian living arise, especially, must everyone speak in tongues? Is it beneficial to others? Does it lead to salvation and spiritual growth? Is it for their benefit? Is it based on the Bible?

The question of speaking in tongues is one of the most contentious issues in ecclesiastical history, and with the rise of global Pentecostalism, it has captured the interest of people, clergy, and religious experts alike. One would also realize that the phenomena of tongue is one subject over which theologians from both the southern and northern hemispheres, with varying denominational and doctrinal backgrounds, are divided and continue to grapple. Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is at the heart of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity. According to Amanze and Shanduka (2015), although it is hotly debated not only among Christians of various

faiths, but also among charismatics themselves. Glossolalia is also questioned by a number of psychologists who regard the ability to talk in tongues as a pathological phenomenon, that is, as part of disordered behavior.

Speaking in tongues has been practiced in Christian churches from the beginning of Christianity in Jerusalem in AD 33. It is based on the Pentecostal experiences described in Acts 2: 1-4, which narrates the arrival of the Holy Spirit in the world on the Day of Pentecost. That event was distinguished by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles, which enabled them to speak in tongues (Amanze & Shanduka, 2015). Various scholars have noted that speaking in tongues is not peculiar to Christianity but that it is also common in other religions (Kildahl, 1972). The issue of speaking in tongues is referred to in a number of Old Testament passages, chief among which is Joel 2:28-9 where it is written:

And afterwards I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

Interestingly, while the text above did not originally mention glossolalia, Pentecostals today consider it to be one of the key theological texts demonstrating that we now live in the era of the Holy Spirit, as prophesied by Prophet Joel, and that the Holy Spirit is available to everyone, and that the born again should be able to speak in tongues as a sign of being wholly connected with God and destined for eternal life in heaven. Glossolalia was popular during the Apostolic period of the Christian era, and St. Paul makes several references to it. It became a source of contention and division in the church of Corinth, as the congregation was divided between those who could and could not speak in tongues (Amanze & Shanduka, 2015). Those who lacked the gift of speaking in tongues were scorned by glossolalics as not being legitimate Christians, prompting St. Paul to warn believers that ecstatic utterance was not the only way the Holy Spirit manifested itself in the Church. He remarked that the Corinthians had an overly narrow understanding of the Holy Spirit and reminded them that the Church has numerous gifts, all of which are given by the same Spirit (1 Cor. 12: 1-11). He warned the Corinthians that speaking in tongues was not a ticket to paradise or a guarantee of the presence of the Holy Spirit, because the euphoric occurrence was identical to the type of spiritual experience known to occur in pagan worship (Harvey, 1979). Montanist societies talked in tongues, experienced profound religious ecstasy, and accepted martyrdom throughout the Patristic period (Dowley, 1977). They accused mainstream Christians of being unspiritual and rejecting the Holy Spirit because they did not talk in tongues (Amanze, 1994). Aside from the aforementioned times, attempts to recreate the migration of speaking languages in other epochs of Christian history have yielded limited evidence (Kildahl, 1972).

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **The Concept of Speaking in Tongues**

The Bible mentions speaking in tongues as a spiritual ability that a baptized person who has accepted Christ can receive from God and the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. This gift enables a person to communicate in a foreign language that they would not have learned otherwise. The expression "speaking in tongues" was first documented in English in the Tyndale Bible, which was published in the early 1500s. Other translations of the Bible have utilized this phrase since then. During this time, the expression "gift of tongues" appeared in Biblical teaching and interpretation to refer to this spiritual gift. Glossolalia is a much more contemporary term, first appearing in the late 1800s. Although the concept of speaking in tongues dates back millennia, it is nevertheless a feature of many different belief systems today.

Based on the patristic evidence, a rudimentary description of tongues (as understood by the church fathers) might be as follows: the gift of tongues was a solitary and supernaturally endowed ability, bestowed by the Holy Spirit on a select group of Christians, enabling those believers to speak in previously unlearned, rational foreign languages. The gift was supposed to be used for either the general edifying of fellow believers (through an interpreter) or the evangelization of unbelievers (by the hearer who heard it in his own language (McDonnell, 1999). The capacity was not granted to all Christians, nor was it required of them. In truth, the gift is little mentioned in patristic literature (particularly in comparison to the other gifts). While the fathers do mention tongues on occasion, they do not emphasize it as a normal element of the Christian experience (Walston, 2003).

Speaking in tongues is most commonly connected with Pentecostals and Pentecostalism among Christians. Many Pentecostal churches encourage their members to pray in tongues in order to communicate with God. Speaking in tongues according to Pentecostals, is a proof that the Holy Spirit has filled a person's body once they have been baptized and accepted Jesus Christ. The practice of speaking in tongues among Pentecostals was also investigated by linguist William Samarin, who addressed it and the practice in general in his 1972 book *Tongues of Men and Angels*.

Glossolalia has also been associated with non-Christian religious cults. Glossolalia was practiced by followers of ancient Greek faiths, and the Bible mentions it as being widespread among "pagans." Glossolalia is practiced in many religions across the world, including Haitian Voodoo, African and Asian shamanistic

religions, Alaskan native religions, and Buddhism. Similarly, Lyon (2018) observed that glossolalia is widespread in Pentecostal Christian worship services, but it has also been observed in other sects of Christianity, as well as other religions (and cults) such as paganism, shamanism, and Japan's God Light Association. During strong religious experiences, people tend to talk in tongues, and Christians frequently ascribe glossolalia to a heavenly gift from the Holy Spirit.

### **Concept of Pentecostalism**

Pentecostalism is a religious phenomenon that emphasizes the Holy Spirit's presence and activities in more dynamic ways in the lives of Christians, and which also insists that baptism of the Holy Spirit is a second experience after the conversion experience. Indeed, the Pentecostals identify the Pentecostal experience of speaking in tongues as the most identifiable mark of a Christian. According to O'Donovan (1996), the Holy Spirit baptism has the capacity to change people's character and behavior, and to help them become more and more like Christ, because it is a miraculous act of God that makes us members of the church. As a result, the church may effectively combat the wicked work of demons through prayer and the use of spiritual warfare weapons.

The Charismatic Renewal is commonly connected with the notion that there is another significant experience following the conversion experience known as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is seen to impact a dynamic spirituality in the lives of Christians. There are pieces of evidence and witnesses to back up this claim. The events of Acts 2 and comparable sections in chapters 10 and 19 constitute the foundation of the Holy Spirit baptism experience. Anderson (2004) emphasized the centrality of religious experience connected with the Holy Spirit and charismatic gifts as the foundation for Pentecostal spirituality throughout the ages.

### **Biblical Antecedence of Tongues**

The first mention of speaking in tongues is found in Acts 2:4. Before ascending into the clouds, Jesus told the apostles to stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came to fill them with power from on high (Luke 24:49). In fulfillment of this promise, on the Day of Pentecost, flames of fire descended on the multitude of people from all walks of life that were assembled in Jerusalem under the auspices of the apostles, and they purportedly talked in tongues or other languages as a result of their filling with the Holy Spirit. Speaking in tongues became a vital feature of modern Pentecostal and charismatic practices, both within Pentecostal-charismatic and mainline churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, against the backdrop of this Pentecost experience. Pentecost is derived from the Greek word *pent-kost*. It directly translates to "fifty-fifth." In New Testament theology, Pentecost or the Day of Pentecost occurs 50 days after Christ's resurrection, when the Holy Spirit descended on the church (Acts 2). However, the concept of Pentecost may be traced back to the Jewish Festival of Weeks (Exodus 23:14-17), which is observed 50 days following Passover to present the first fruits of the harvest to God. The feast or festival of Pentecost is commemorated on the seventh Sunday or fifty-first day after Easter each year to commemorate the descent of the Holy Spirit on the ancient church calendar.

### **Pentecostalism: A Dynamic Spirituality**

The phenomenon of speaking in tongues can be traced back to W. J. Seymour, an Afro-American minister in the United States, who in 1906, through his sermons on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly the gift of speaking in tongues, enraged his congregation to the point where they began to speak in tongues. All of this occurred at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles, in a massive old building. This became the epicenter of Pentecostalism, and therefore of tongues. According to reports, the center attracted visitors from all over the world following this religious encounter. When they went home, they established similar Pentecostal organizations. The gift of speaking in tongues was heavily emphasized (Kildahl, 1972). According to Kildahl (1972), the Pentecostal teaching is built on the fundamental idea that glossolalia manifests the entire New Testament baptism in the Spirit and that it is God's intention to pour out his Spirit in this fashion upon all flesh. At the heart of this view is the conviction that glossolalia is a genuine gift of the Holy Spirit and that it is required proof of Spirit baptism (Kildahl, 1972).

The contemporary Charismatic Renewal movement in Nigeria is partially the result of a strong religious awakening among youths associated with the Scripture Union in war-torn Biafra (Eastern Nigeria). This started in 1968. However, it was at the University of Ibadan that the resurgence gained national traction. In January 1970, some Christian Union students claimed to have been immersed in the Holy Spirit in a private prayer meeting, sparking a revival. Though it was a tiny group, three Christian Union officials bravely recounted their Pentecostal experience. Within a short period of time, more students welcomed the experience, and it quickly expanded to other Christian organizations such as the Student Christian Movement (founded in Nigeria around 1937) and the Scripture Union (founded in 1887), as well as other Universities. Indeed, by 1973, the revival had grown so strong that some Christian students hung a large banner at the gate of the then-University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) with the bold slogan, "Welcome to Jesus University."

In its early years in Nigeria, the Renewal was marked by a growing wave of evangelistic and pentecostalizing efforts, and this doctrinal emphasis aided its quick geographical spread. Furthermore, beginning in the mid-1970s, graduates of Nigeria's higher education institutions formed autonomous Charismatic groups to share and promote their Pentecostal experience, as well as to continue their campus activities. By 1974, over 10 Charismatic organizations had been founded by graduates who had previously been impacted by the revival. The Hour of Freedom Evangelistic Association, Onitsha, which was founded in 1970, was one of the first. The Souls Harvesters were founded in Warri in 1971, the Master's Vessels Group in Umuahia about 1972, and the Deeper Christian Life Ministry in Lagos in 1973 (Ojo, 1992).

Most mainline Protestant denominations that had been conservative and rejected Pentecostal resurgences were beginning to be impacted by the Charismatic Renewal by the turn of the millennium. Pentecostalism entered these faiths through student groups such as the Baptist Student Fellowship, the Methodist Evangelical Movement, the Anglican Youth Fellowship, or the Evangelical Fellowship of Anglican Communion (EFAC), among others. Worship services in some of these denominations were revitalized and modified to include Pentecostal flavor as opposition faded. The Charismatic Renewal and its associated Pentecostal spirituality eventually became emblems of change within an evangelical culture. With the benefit of hindsight, an evangelical scholar, Emiola Nihinlola, was correct when he advised his Baptist people, in response to the spreading Charismatic Renewal, "Don't Reject It, Don't Adopt It, Study It, Moderate It, and Experience It."

Classical Pentecostals and Charismatics were first wary of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movements because, before its formation, the Roman Catholic Church had been branded the great Babylon of the book of Revelation. But it didn't take long for Catholic and Protestant Charismatics to start praying together on a regular basis (Ojo, 2018). The key difference in Nigeria between Catholic Charismatics and Protestant Charismatics is that the latter choose to build independent Charismatic churches in order to enhance their Charismatic experience, whereas Catholic Charismatics want to remain in the Roman Catholic Church.

### **Speaking in Tongues in the Post-Apostolic Church**

Green (1975) contends that there is sufficient evidence in church history to support the continuity of tongues in the church from the time of the apostles to the present. Deere (2006) reinforces the point that there are no actual or genuine tongues in the world today. Omenyo (2006) asserts that both real and phony tongues can be seen in the church today, citing 1 Corinthians 14. Similarly, according to Grudem (as reported in Bansah, 2016), tongues are intended for believers of all ages. So, on the whole, we are convinced by the aforementioned experts and a slew of others not included here that speaking in a dialect is a gift given to a selected group of Christians throughout history.

Following the emergence of global Pentecostalism, Bansah (2016) observed that Christians who profess to be Pentecostal or charismatic generally nurture the notion that speaking in tongues was not limited to the apostolic church and that there is an indication of the genuineness of tongues throughout the church's existence and would continue until Christ's second coming; the Parousia. For such Christians, speaking in strange and unfamiliar languages is proof that they have received the Holy Spirit baptism.

As part of their hermeneutic that views Acts as a model for the church today (Menzie, 2016), the Pentecostals regard the events of the Day of Pentecost seriously (Acts 2) to be repeatable in terms of the promise that the gift of the Spirit was for the attendants and their offspring (Acts 2:39). Speaking in tongues, they contend, serves not only as a precedent and model of Spirit baptism (Mittelstadt, 2010), but also as repeated evidence of the Holy Spirit's ongoing presence (Synan, 1994). However, they (are forced to) admit that there is a significant difference between the original experience on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, where the respective languages are recognized by people from different regions (xenolalia), and the separate gift of languages described in 1 Corinthians 12-14, which requires a further gift, namely the gift of interpretation (Thiselton, 2000), to make sense (glossolalia) (Lockwood, 2000). They believe that the Corinthian experience of speaking in tongues is consistent with modern Pentecostal believers' experience of Spirit baptism (Thiselton, 2000; Busenitz, 2014), and they believe that there is a continuity between Acts and Corinthians, as well as contemporary charismatic experiences of speaking in tongues (Thiselton, 2000).

Modern Pentecostals associate their tongue-speaking experience with the Corinthian phenomena and refer to it as heavenly languages, ecstatic languages, angelic languages, or prayer languages (Stibbe, 1997). They suggest that the early church naturally accepted glossolalia as a normal, frequent, and expected element of believers' experiences, and that it corresponded with the Corinthian experience (Menzie, 2016), as it does in the modern Pentecostal Movement.

As a result, the gifts (including languages) did not require any prior human effort or aptitude to achieve. That is not to argue that speaking in tongues cause a lack of self-control, but rather that it was actually a gift given by God's love to anyone He chose. There was no need for training, knowledge, or personal

achievement—"some spoke in tongues that they did not know and that no one had taught them" (Busenitz, 2006).

### **Speaking in Tongues among Nigerian Pentecostals**

The church fathers considered tongues to be a supernatural ability. No amount of human effort, initiation, or instruction could help in attaining what could only be obtained via the Holy Spirit. According to Busenitz (2006), an accurate Pentecostal depiction of tongues (at least in its practical use) would be as follows: The ability to talk in a spiritual language (which has no discernible resemblance to any authentic rational language) for the church or for personal edification is included in the gift of tongues. Tongues are interpreted by persons with the gift of interpretation (with different interpretations derived from the same message) if they are intended for the church. If the message is intended for personal enlightenment, it is not interpreted at all. Overall tongues-speaking is a self-induced phenomenon that is available to everyone who is prepared to learn it. Though some Pentecostal leaders may not agree with this exact definition, it accurately reflects their writings and follows the history and practice of tongues-speech in their ecclesiastical communities.

According to Barnett and McGregor (1986), "every Spirit-filled Christian can and should pray frequently in tongues for self-edification (1 Cor. 14:2,4,5,18), building himself up by praying in the Holy Ghost (Barnett & McGregor, 1986)." "This chapter attests to the truth that the glossolalia phenomenon can and does benefit the individual," James Slay writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 14. Tongues and tongue interpretation are gifts given to the church by God's will and through the Spirit. This endowment is an important aspect of the charismata, and because it blesses the individual, it will inevitably have a beneficial effect on the church, because the church is made up of individuals" (Busenitz, 2006).

Spittler (2002) asserts that "the significance of glossolalia for the individual speaker may lie in its capacity to vent the inexpressible—hence the observed connection with stress." According to Wayne, "the most persistent positive claim for the experience of tongue speaking is that it provides a continuing source of spiritual power and joy in the Christian life." Almost everyone who has had the experience says it enriches their prayer life to the point that it appears they have never prayed before. Many people mention an overflowing delight in their lives, and many others display a new vigor, which is the best support for the tongues experience (Busenitz, 2006).

According to Achunike (2004), Pentecostalism is known for supporting a spirituality that despises constraint and standardization while inducing an intimate contact with the Holy Spirit. Many Nigerians are now seeking spirituality manifested in power because seeing is believing. The power is proof of an individual's religious life's validity and genuineness. In this context, Achunike remarks, "People are looking for men of God and Spiritual masters, and the results of their encounter with these men of God will yield for them." To that aim, religious pragmatism is becoming more prevalent in Nigerian spirituality and prayer (Achunike, 2004).

Based on Pattison's (1964) stance, three probable origins of glossolalia can be identified. For starters, this experience could be self-inflicted. Peer pressure from other Christians can be extremely powerful. Psychological aspects are involved. Many people are confused in their real search for truth because of their tremendous desire for spiritual experiences, which can lead to a false experience that appears very spiritual. This is facilitated by incorrect teaching concerning the gift of languages. Another possibility for glossolalia is demonic influence.

In today's Nigerian Christian context, it's difficult to picture a genuine minister of God who lacks spiritual gifts. In Nigerian mainline churches, charismatic spirituality is better described as an assessment of an in-depth religious consciousness, or as an un-concealment of the divine and an in-breaking of the people's fundamental religious demands. "In Nigeria, all denominations are experiencing renewal," writes Hocken (2001). Prayer and fasting are prevalent, as are miracles and wonders of healing and deliverance." This discovery demonstrates the impact of Pentecostalism on Nigeria's mainline churches. The growth of Pentecostalism infused a spirituality into Nigeria that had not been developed by the early western missionaries. It established an orientation to faith and ecclesial polity that is markedly different from the mainline churches' original practices. Pentecostalism has reawakened a strong desire in the country for a primeval spirituality.

According to Oyetade's (2020) research, the first Sunday of the month is designated Pentecostal Sunday in the Apostolic Church, when members are called out. Elders and deaconesses would surround the other members, particularly the youth. When the pastor asks the congregation to request Holy Spirit baptism, some of them begin speaking in tongues which frequently leads to prophecy, heavenly messages that lead to healing, warning, or rebuke for those who have done something wrong. The church loves this more during revival times. According to Oyetade (2020), in Cherubim and Seraphim, the interpreter then interprets the message, which can be a means of exposing the devil's craftiness, warning for those who are committing concealed sin(s) in the crowd. Ogunewu (2009) believes that the glossolalia performed in Paul's churches was incoherent speech made to God. In an interview, for example, Mr. Adeniji affirms that Pastor Dr. D.K. Olukoya, the founder of Mountain of Fire Miracle Church, would first speak in tongues, followed by prophetic declarations and signs and wonders as live evidence. Apostle Johnson Suleman, the founder of Omega Fire

Ministry, talks in tongues during his ministry, from which he makes heavenly insights known to the assembly and is also followed by remarkable miracles. Dr. Paul Eneche, the founder of Dunamis International Gospel Centre, talks in tongues while preaching, which is followed by a prophetic statement that results in miracles (Oyetade, 2020). According to Zodhiates (1997), conservative evangelicals often claim that the primary objective of glossolalia was evangelistic because the purpose of any biblical gift is to rescue souls.

Tongues have been utilized as an acid test, a sign to further validate the truth of God's word. God has utilized tongues in the CAC, both during regular service and at revival times, to reaffirm His word and to further build the faith of church members. Pastor E.A Adeboye is used to speaking in unfamiliar tongues when in the Spirit; yet, he provides adequate interpretation afterwards. This shows that he understands the need of interpreting tongues in order to minimize confusion in the church. Pastor Adedeji stated that he expresses this temperament only when necessary, as guided by the Holy Spirit (Oyetade, 2020).

Furthermore, when using "tongues," one frequently reaches the realms of poetry and music. This, according to Pastor Bamidele, is typical in many Pentecostal and Indigenous congregations. Apostle Johnson Suleman of Omega Fire Ministry, Dr. Paul Eneche of Dunamis International Gospel Centre, Bishop David Olaniyi Oyedepo of Living Faith Church, Prophet Korode of Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Ilorin, and others, among others, frequently sing in tongues while ministering deliverance to the congregation (Oyetade, 2020). Matthew Ashimolowo, the Senior Pastor of Kingsway International Christian Centre in London, is a Nigerian priest who also speaks in tongues.

Speaking in tongues encourages church members to express rather than repress their feelings. According to Oyetade (2020), the Pentecostal and indigenous churches are the fastest-growing segments of Christianity, particularly in Nigeria. One of the possible reasons for their growth is that they encourage people to express rather than repress their emotions. This can be harmful if people's faith is based on emotions, but it can be beneficial if those emotions are a real reaction to the good news of Jesus Christ. Pentecostal and indigenous congregations are often more liberated in their expression of joy.

Visitors to a Pentecostal or indigenous church are likely to observe people who are joyful and happy as a result of their trust in Jesus Christ. This example is a powerful tool for evangelism and church growth. This extraordinary occurrence at Cornelius' home demonstrated that God had opened the door to salvation for the Gentile world. Before being baptized into Christ, they spoke in other languages. The Holy Spirit had revealed Himself when He "came upon them." This was a "outside" manifestation rather than a "inside" residence. Surely, God was opening the way to salvation for all of humanity, not only the Jews. These Gentile believers were baptized into Christ right away. These believers will receive the Holy Spirit "just as we have." He is referring to the Spirit's gift of tongues, which occurred on Pentecost (Acts 10:44-46).

## II. Conclusion

Speaking in tongues is an aspect of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Tongues are one of the spiritual gifts provided by God for the spiritual growth of the church, the body of Christ. The gift of tongues has existed from the time of the apostles to the twenty-first century church. Speaking in tongues as a form of worship and part of Pentecostals' daily prayer practice has had and continues to have a significant religious awakening and deepening of faith for Christians. Tongues provide a valid type of interaction with God via praise and worship. As a result, the goal of the gift of tongues is to glorify God and to urge those who lack the gift to work on the other gifts for the building of the body of Christ.

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