

A HISTORICAL-THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF PENTECOSTAL-CHARISMATIC GLOSSOLALIA

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of glossolalia, in other words, speaking in tongues is among the controversial issues debated across Christian circles. In a response to the discourse, the paper attempts to discuss the phenomenon from historical and theological standpoints. Grounded in the New Testament, notably in the Acts of Apostles and Pauline writings, speaking in tongues has been a distinct feature of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. The study journeys through the development of glossolalia from early Christian traditions where it was seen as both a spiritual gift and a sign of God's encounter, through its decline during the institutionalisation of Christianity, and its resurgence in modern Pentecostal revivals of the 20th century. The necessity of glossolalia in the early church as well as its distinctive features have been examined. Cessation versus continuation debate has also been given a considerable attention by dialoguing with scholars. This study employs a historical-theological approach, tracing glossolalia's development from biblical foundations to modern Pentecostal revivals. It analyses theological debates, particularly cessationism vs. continuationism, using qualitative textual analysis of biblical, historical, and scholarly sources to provide a comprehensive understanding beyond metaphysical interpretations. The paper concludes by affirming that since glossolalia extends beyond the metaphysical, drawing conclusions based solely on its metaphysical significance is highly likely to be inappropriate.

Keywords: *Glossolalia, Pentecost, Cessation, Continuation, Psycholinguistic, Anthropological*

Publication History

Date received: 30-12-2024
Date accepted: 26-03-2025
Date published: 14-05-25

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The English word “charismatic” originates from two Greek words *charis* which translates into ‘grace’ and *mata* which in English translates into ‘gifts’.¹ Ervin Budiselić has corroboratively affirmed that, the term *glossolalia* combines the noun *glōssa*, meaning “tongue” (as in the organ, speech, or language), and the verb *laleō*, meaning “to speak” or “to utter,” giving rise to the expression “to speak in” or “with a tongue” or “tongues.”² Closely related to glossolalia but distinct is Xenoglossia, derived from the Greek words *xenos* (foreigner) and *glossa* (language), refers to the intelligible phenomenon of speaking a real foreign language one has never learned, understood by others who know the language.³ Nisbett and Walmsley contributing to the topic maintain that etymologically, charisma lies in the ancient Greek word for divinely inspired gift with the early Christian church adoption to connote these gifts or charismata, “which enabled recipients to carry out extraordinary feats.”⁴ *Charismatic* from the assertion above can be associated with the belief in or manifestation of spiritual gifts and divine empowerment, particularly in religious movements.

Glossolalia on the other hand according to Koic et al was formed from “Greek language *glosso*, *glossa*=tongue and *lalein*, *laleo*, *lalia* = talking, chatter, and therefore glossolalia is interpreted as speaking in tongues.”⁵ They further define glossolalia as a “vocalization of sounds that are only alike, but in their semantic meaning and syntax they are different from any known languages.”⁶ It can be deduced from the definition above that *glossolalia* is a linguistic phenomenon characterized by the utterance of non-understandable, mostly unintelligible speech. Generally, speaking in tongues, in other words glossolalia has in recent times been identified with the Pentecostals and Charismatic faith traditions. Denzil R. Miller supports this assertion by writing that, right from the outset the practice of speaking in tongues has been a characteristic of the modern Pentecostal movement.⁷ In the submission of Steidl, tongue speaking can connote any of the following: the tongue as an organ of speech (Mk 7:33), a language (Rev. 5:9), and the supernatural gift of speaking another language without having learned it academically (1 Cor. 12:10).⁸ Though each of the three can be applied to the concept, glossolalia has become more identified with the latter. Mark J. Cartledge reflects, *glossolalia* is understood from the Pentecostal and Charismatic standpoint as Unknown human languages (*xenolalia*), divine or angelic tongues, or a distinct spiritual dialect which transcends description.⁹ In the Charismatic cosmovision, *glossolalia* is often considered as a spiritual gift and is associated with a deep connection to the Supreme reality (God). In formulating a practical definition of glossolalia, Ruse draws on Burgess’s description, which defines it as typically—though not always—a religious practice involving the utterance of sounds that form, or seem to form, a language unknown to the speaker.¹⁰ This phenomenon is often linked to heightened emotional or spiritual states, and within

¹ “Charisma.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charisma>. Accessed 7 Mar. 2025.

² Ervin Budiselić, “Glossolalia: Why Christians Can Speak in Tongues in a Church Service without Interpretation,” *Evangelical Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (2016): 177-201, 178.

³ Michael W. Smith, *The Gospel Truth: From Babel to Pentecost or "Other Tongues"*, Issue 9 (Nixa, MO: Church of God, 2014), 4.

⁴ Melissa Nisbett and Ben Walmsley, “The Romanticization of Charismatic Leadership in the Arts,” *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 46, no. 1 (2016): 2-12, 3.

⁵ Elvira Koic et al., “Glossolalia,” *Collegium Antrologicum*, 29, no. 1 (2005): 373-379, 373.

⁶ Koic et al., “Glossolalia”, 373.

⁷ Denzil R. Miller, *Missionary Tongues Revisited: More Than an Evidence: Recapturing Luke’s Missional Perspective on Speaking in Tongues* (Springfield: PneumaLife Publications, 2014), 9.

⁸ Grant Steidl, *Tongues*, (Illinois: Grace & Truth, Inc., 1991), 5.

⁹ Mark J. Cartledge, “The Symbolism of Charismatic Glossolalia,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* 12, no. 1 (1999): 37-51, 37.

¹⁰ Burgess as cited in Patricia A. Ruse, *Embracing the Experience of Glossolalia (“Speaking in Tongues”) as a Principal Discipline of Christian Spiritual Formation*, (Doctorate Thesis: George Fox University, 2019), 13.

Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, it is commonly regarded (though not universally) as a distinctive sign confirming one's baptism in the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Burgess' position holds that Pentecostals and Charismatics hold glossolalia in high esteem by using it as the sign of baptism in the Holy Spirit and by its very essence, involve the production of sounds which in most cases are unintelligible to the speaker. In Patricia A. Ruse's thought, glossolalia results in the disassociation of the present conscious mind enhancing the communion of the human spirit with the heart of God in which case the Holy Spirit takes over the person under such experience at a point where words are not enough and effective tool for communication between mankind and his maker.¹² Glossolalia may sound like natural language but lacks semantic meaning and structure. In Pentecostal-Charismatic circles, it is seen as direct divine communication and a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence, leading many believers to actively pursue the practice.

Jennings asserts that *glossolalia* is not exclusive to Christianity, but is expressive in other religious traditions. It is practiced in various non-Christian religions, including the Peyote cult of the North American Indians, the Haida Indians of the Pacific Northwest, Shamans in the Sudan and Greenland, the Shango cult of West Africa, the Shago cult in Trinidad, the Voodoo cult in Haiti, the Aborigines of South America and Australia, the Eskimos of subarctic North America and Asia, the Dyaks of Borneo, the Zor cult of Ethiopia, the Siberian shamans, the Chaco Indians of South America, the Curanderos of the Andes, the Kinka of the African Sudan, the Thonga shamans of Africa, and Tibetan monks.¹³ Jennings' assertion brings to fore the various religious traditions aside Christianity whose members encounter tongues speaking. Kimutai corroborates this position by noting that "description of ecstatic speech are common in the study of comparative religions. In some cases, the phenomena bears striking resemblance to the glossolalia speech described in the N.T. Ecstatic behavior is found most frequently in the shaman, the seer and the prophet. Generally, the ecstatic state is associated with the divine or spirit possession and inspiration."¹⁴ Kimutai seeks to affirm that the phenomenon of glossolalia permeates diverse religious traditions with notable parallels in these practices.

2.0 BIBLICAL ANTECEDENT

2.1 Old and New Testaments

Scholars such as William J. Samarin, Morton Smith, Christopher Forbes, Roland de Vaux and James D.G. Dunn hold that the speaking in tongues may have originated from the ancient Near East ecstatic practices.¹⁵ Although glossolalia has been an ancient tradition which even predates the apostolic era, the origin of classical glossolalia in general terms can be traced to the apostolic era and has gained currency in recent years. William J. Samarin explains, classical glossolalia describes speech that flows naturally and follows patterns yet does not align with any recognized human language. It serves mainly as a spiritual or devotional act rather than a communicative tool.¹⁶ As James K. A. Smith notes, ecstatic speech predates Christianity, but glossolalia as a distinct spiritual gift is most clearly rooted in the apostolic era, especially, in the Pentecost event of Acts 2.¹⁷ Furthermore, Harvey Cox observes that although present in early Christian movements, the practice has experienced a significant revival in

¹¹ Burgess as cited in Ruse, *Embracing the Experience of Glossolalia*, 13.

¹² Patricia A. Ruse, *Embracing the Experience of Glossolalia ("Speaking in Tongues") as a Principal Discipline of Christian Spiritual Formation*, 13.

¹³ Jennings as quoted by Elvira Koic et al, "Glossolalia", 373.

¹⁴ Chesosi Bonface Kimutai, "Glossolalia: The Challenges and Remedies of the Nature and Functions Evaluating Tongues in the Christian Church: An Integrated Approach," *IAR Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020):1-11, 1 Samuel 10:5-6.

¹⁵ Watson Mills as cited in Patricia A. Ruse, *Embracing the Experience of Glossolalia ("Speaking in Tongues") as a Principal Discipline of Christian Spiritual Formation*, 24.

¹⁶ William J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 112.

¹⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 24.

modern Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, becoming one of the most prevalent expressions of contemporary Christianity.¹⁸ One may argue that glossolalia is a typology of Old ecstatic which occurred when the Spirit of God took full control over one's being and can be gleaned from few texts such as Numbers 11:24-29 and 1 Samuel 10:5-6 among others. This conclusion is drawn from the high degree of concordances that ecstatic experiences in the Old Testament shares with the New Testament experience of glossolalia. The term *Corinthian glossolalia* is occasionally used to describe the specific form of speaking in tongues practiced by the early Christian community in Corinth, as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12-14, but it is not widely recognized as a distinct scholarly category, with scholars instead classifying glossolalia more broadly under classical or Pentecostal glossolalia to encompass its various historical and contemporary expressions. Jane MacLeod Clenseur has clarified that, some interpreters suggest that the speaking in tongues at Corinth involved unintelligible sounds rather than actual foreign languages.¹⁹ Frank Stagg, E. Glenn Hinson and Wayne E. Oates have argued that, the tongues spoken at Corinth were not known languages such as Latin, Greek, or Aramaic, but instead were unintelligible utterances.²⁰ To Harrisville, Jewish apocalypticism which drew no distinction between glossolalia and unintelligible ecstatic speech was the background of the Corinthian glossolalia which is a key text as far as the topic is concerned.²¹

Peter, addressing the crowd after the dramatic events of Pentecost, declared that what they were witnessing was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, affirming that in the last days, God would pour out His Spirit on all people, enabling sons and daughters to prophesy, young men to see visions, and old men to dream dreams (Acts 2:16-18). Joel had prophesied: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people; your sons and daughters will prophesy, your elders will dream dreams, and your young men will have visions" (Joel 2:28). While Joel does not specify a timeline, Peter's statement aims to provide more details about the events of the end times. He sought to reaffirm Joel's words and highlight how God had fulfilled His promise. In Acts 2:4, *glossais* refers to spoken languages, clarified by *heterais* to indicate they were not the speakers' native tongues. This is confirmed by the gathered Jews recognizing the languages as their own (*dialektoi*) in Acts 2:5-8. Acts 2:11 further reveals that these utterances proclaimed God's wonderful works. A similar event occurs in Acts 10:46. After believing in Jesus and being baptized (Acts 19:4-5), the believers received the Holy Spirit through Paul's laying on of hands, leading to speaking in tongues and prophesying (Acts 19:6). This aligns with previous instances of speaking in known but foreign languages, though the specific content of their speech is not detailed.

2.2 Historical Survey

In recounting the historical development of glossolalia, Nathan Busenitz notes that while the church fathers after the apostles spoke less frequently about the gift of speaking in tongues, their limited commentary remains significant when compared to contemporary Pentecostal views on the subject.²² Among the church fathers that lived following the death of John the Revelator in 98 A.D.²³, Montanus stands tall as a leader in support of tongues. This is justified by Eusebius' narration that the followers of Montanus were usually carried in spirit resulting into a certain kind of frenzy and irregular ecstasy

¹⁸ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 15.

¹⁹ Jane MacLeod Clenseur, *A Phonetic Analysis of Glossolalia* (Masters' Thesis: The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1972), 15.

²⁰ Frank Stagg, E. Glenn Hinson and Wayne E. Oates, *Glossolalia: Tongue Speaking in Biblical, Historical, and Psychological Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 15-16.

²¹ Harrisville as cited in Mark J. Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia: An Empirical-Theological Study*, 65.

²² Nathan Busenitz as cited in Ruse, *Embracing the Experience of Glossolalia* ("Speaking in Tongues"), 48.

²³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882), 427.

“raving and uttering strange things.”²⁴ In his submission, A. Barkley, the earliest recorded instance of glossolalia after the apostolic era, is found among the Montanists in the second century.²⁵ J. Stevenson has added that, the Montanists brought forth a new form of prophecy, which Eusebius described as being “opposed to the long-standing and consistent practice of the Church.”²⁶ Montanism, according to Clenseur, which highlighted both prophecy and glossolalia, emerged in Phrygia, Asia Minor, in the mid-second century.²⁷ Stevenson further observes, Montanus asserted that he would enter a trance or state of ecstatic experience – suddenly overtaken by the Spirit. He appeared to be possessed, exhibiting unusual ecstasy, during which he became frenzied and began speaking incoherently, producing strange sounds.²⁸ Montanus claimed that a greater revelation was unfolding through the promised Spirit, seeing himself as the mouthpiece of the Paraclete and delivering messages in unusual utterances – leading some to view him as demon-possessed and others as divinely inspired.²⁹ Kidd writes, initially remaining within the Church, the Montanist movement was soon deemed doctrinally incompatible, prompting synodical action in Asia Minor that led to its separation and eventual degeneration into laxity under the leadership of lesser figures like Themiso.³⁰

According to Eddie L. Hyatt asserts during the Dark Age the Catholic Church's strict enforcement of its teachings led to a decline in the practice of speaking in tongues.³¹ In affirmation, Clenseur has succinctly averred that by the late fourth century, speaking in tongues had ceased in both the East and West, with little to no evidence of the phenomenon reappearing between the fourth and sixteenth centuries.³² The first record of glossolalia involved a German Abbess, Saint Hildengard, who experienced tongues speaking due to “a strange and powerfully moving religious experience and following a long series of visions which she had not discussed with anyone.”³³ Although the Church Fathers did not speak in tongues, they unanimously acknowledged the gift of tongues while affirming its exclusivity to certain believers.³⁴ Ambrose expresses the above position by observing that “[n]ot all, says he, have the gift of healings, nor do all, says he, speak with tongues.”³⁵ The church fathers held the idea that tongues speaking was to edify, encourage, and evangelize other people (both inside and outside the church).³⁶

With the emergence of the Reformation, the Catholic dominance over the church began to dwindle resulting in tongues speaking gaining currency once again in the church. Among the key people who demonstrated the power of tongues speaking was Martin Luther King and Jansenists who were condemned by the Roman Church. Aside these, Cevennes, similar to the Jansenists was a revival group in France that manifested the gift of glossolalia at the time.³⁷

²⁴ Klaude Kendrick as cited in Eusebius, <https://www.apostolic.edu/speaking-in-tongues-throughout-history/> accessed on December 2, 2023.

²⁵ A. Barkley, *Glossolalia in Church History* (n.p., n.d.), 1–37. Pdf file

²⁶ J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius* (London, 1957), 108.

²⁷ Clenseur, A Phonetic Analyss of Glossolalia, 5.

²⁸ Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, 108.

²⁹ Beresford J. Kidd, *A History of the Church to A.D. 461* Vol. 1 (Oxford: The Clarendon press, 1922), 281

³⁰ Kidd, *A History of the Church to A.D. 461*, 281.

³¹ Eddie L. Hyatt, *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity: A 21st Century Look at Church History from a Pentecostal/Charismatic Perspective* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2002), 73.

³² Clenseur, A Phonetic Analyss of Glossolalia, 6.

³³ Watson E. Mills, *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 27.

³⁴ Nathan Busenitz, “The Gift of Tongues: Comparing the Church Fathers with Contemporary Pentecostalism,” *The Master's Seminary Journal (TMSJ)* 17, no. 1 (2006):61-78, 64.

³⁵ Ambrose as cited in Nathan Busenitz, “The Gift of Tongues: Comparing the Church Fathers with Contemporary Pentecostalism,” 64.

³⁶ Busenitz, “The Gift of Tongues,” 65.

³⁷ Hyatt, *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity: A 21st Century Look at Church History from a Pentecostal/Charismatic Perspective*, 97-99.

During this dispensation, the notion of Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) was first formulated and propagated by Great Reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli.³⁸ John Wesley's contribution in helping the group to construct a doctrinal framework in an era the church lacked sound biblical teaching was commendable.³⁹ Wesley's student, John Fletcher, in 1894, started a movement in Iowa which taught that there is a "third blessing", that is, "the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire" which followed and complemented the conversion and sanctification experiences taught by the Methodist Holiness Movement.⁴⁰

In the beginning of the twentieth century (1900), Charles Fox Parham and his Bible School students were the first to make major strides in studying the phenomenon of glossolalia submitting that it was the scriptural evidence of baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁴¹ According to them, one was not considered close to being baptized in the Holy Spirit until one experienced speaking in tongues. Cartledge further notes that Parham was the first to identify speaking in tongues as the sole evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit and advocated for its inclusion in regular Christian worship rather than viewing it as mere religious enthusiasm.⁴² The emergence of charismatic glossolalia at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles in 1906, a revival with Methodist influences, can be directly traced to Charles Parham's teachings.⁴³ It was during this time that the phenomenon gained inter-continental attention as it spread from one geographical area to the other. With the passage of time, Christian denominations that shared Parham's assertion that glossolalia was the only indicator for Holy Spirit baptism added prophecy, dancing and shouting.⁴⁴

Surveying its frequency in *lexicography of glossolalia*, Harrisville maintains that, statistics from the New Testament indicates that there are thirty-five references to glossolalia in the New Testament out of which twenty-eight are found in 1Corinthians and the remaining seven are interspersed in the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of Mark.⁴⁵ The unparalleled attention given to glossolalia suggests that the practice was either particularly prevalent or controversial within that Christian community, requiring detailed instruction or clarification.

2.3 Characteristics and Role/Importance of Glossolalia

A common theme in various definitions of glossolalia is that it involves speaking in an unintelligible language, occurring when the speaker connects with their Creator in a state beyond conscious awareness, expressing words that go beyond known languages as a means of communicating with the Divine.

Cartledge contends that glossolalia becomes necessary when the very words "of one's normal language prove inadequate."⁴⁶ He further observes that tongue speaking is a form of communication rooted in the spiritual realm rather than the intellectual. It emanates from the emotions rather than the intellect.⁴⁷ The manifestation of glossolalia serves as a sign and evidence of God's presence in a special way serving as a marker of group identity, a voice for the voiceless and illiterate, and a means of liberation from rigid linguistic structures.⁴⁸ The above statement highlights the universal and inclusive

³⁸ Don Thorsen, "Sola Scriptura and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral" in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 41, no. 2 (2006): 7-27, 7.

³⁹ Isaac Boaheng, "From Wesleyanism to Pentecostalism: Historical and Theological Perspectives," *Pentecostalism, Charismaticism and Neo-Prophetic Movements Journal (PECANEP)* 1, no. 3 (2020):50-59, 53.

⁴⁰ Boaheng, "From Wesleyanism to Pentecostalism: Historical and Theological Perspectives," 52.

⁴¹ Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 70.

⁴² Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 90.

⁴³ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Charismatic-movement.html>/accessed on November 20, 2023.

⁴⁴ Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 74.

⁴⁵ Roy A. Harrisville as quoted in Mark J. Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia: An Empirical-Theological Study*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), 61.

⁴⁶ Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia: An Empirical-Theological Study*, 135.

⁴⁷ Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 135.

⁴⁸ Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 135.

nature of glossolalia on all humankind irrespective of educational status, social status, race, nationality, inter alia. It also emphasizes the communal life of worship that all believers are called to partake although individual religious activities are not to be relegated to the sidelines (Hebrews 10:25).

Contesting the position of the unintelligible nature of glossolalia, David W. Cloud maintains that a basic feature “about biblical tongues is that they were real languages,” and “not some sort of unintelligible mutterings” as purported by some commentators.⁴⁹ Cloud’s thought emanates from the Biblical account in Acts 2:6-11 where the writer mentions about fourteen different languages the Pentecost event enabled the people to speak and substantiated by the bystanders as earthly languages and not unintelligible ones. In analyzing the above thoughts, while Cloud’s argument aligns with the Pentecost account as evidence of earthly languages, it does not fully engage with Pauline descriptions of glossolalia, which some interpret as referring to a spiritual or heavenly language. The nature of glossolalia, therefore, remains a debated issue, with different theological traditions emphasizing different biblical texts to support their views. Commenting on the significance of tongues speaking, Ruse submits: “one of the greatest values of glossolalia is that it forces us to consider the possibility of direct contact with the non-physical or spiritual reality as it forces us to re-examine some of our basic Western theology, our presuppositions, indeed our certainty that there is nothing worth reaching far beyond the [rational,] sensory world.”⁵⁰ Gathering from the above, glossolalia challenges the dominance of rationalism in Western theology by prompting a reconsideration of spiritual experiences that transcend the sensory and intellectual realms, suggesting the possibility of direct interaction with a non-physical or divine reality.

Gordon Fee holds that the occurrence of glossolalia which promotes the power of God in man should be understood as a sign of human weakness and total dependence on their creator.⁵¹ Deductively, Fee stresses on the importance of God (Holy Spirit) in every facet of the Christian journey and without whose effort man cannot achieve anything meaningful in life. Glossolalia is practiced by individuals in both private and public worship contexts with the speaker in most cases in an excited psychological state “or may enter in blissful and peaceful meditative or prayer-like stance.”⁵²

Catholic theologian Rend Laurentin defines the functions of glossolalia as serving an aesthetic and musical role by inspiring sacred music, enhancing the power of grace and intercessory prayer, and providing liberation from the limitations and imperfections of ordinary language.⁵³ The functions enumerated above underscore the acceptability of glossolalia even outside Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions.

3.0 THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF GLOSSOLALIA

3.1 Cessation versus Continuation Debate

Proponents of cessationism like John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and B.B. Warfield hold a doctrinal belief that charismata, particularly glossolalia, prophecy and healing ceased to operate during the apostolic era of the church.⁵⁴ Others such as John MacArthur, Abraham Kuyper and Richard B. Gaffin Jr. contend that they have lost their usefulness and as such have disappeared. Antithetical to this view, continuationists contend that all the spiritual gifts of the apostolic era are still available to the church today – particularly those gifts that involved prophetic and miraculous phenomena. The whole argument is premised on Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 13:8 where he tells the Corinthians that the gift of tongues speaking could cease without giving an explicit timeline.

⁴⁹ David W. Cloud, *Speaking Tongues*, (London: Bethel Baptist Print Ministry, 2012), 17.

⁵⁰ Morton Kelsley as quoted by Patricia A. Ruse, *Embracing the Experience of Glossolalia* (“*Speaking in Tongues*”), 2.

⁵¹ Gordon D. Fee as cited in Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 135.

⁵² Kenneth L. Nolen, https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-1-4614-6086-2_263/accessed on November 22, 2023.

⁵³ Rend Laurentin as quoted by Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 76.

⁵⁴ Kelebogile T. Resane, “Cessationism and continuationism: Pentecostal trinitarianism balances the tension,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (2022): 1-7, 1.

Cessationists argue that sign gifts were uniquely linked to the apostolic era, which concluded with the completion of the biblical canon, asserting that one cannot claim apostolic signs without also holding the apostolic office (2 Cor 12:12, Heb 2:4). Granted the apostolic signs are in continuation, one would expect a consistent stream of apostles through all periods of church history down to even today. Cessationists further maintain that Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 13:8 that tongues would cease was made with the canonical perspective that once it is completed glossolalia also ceases, implying the canon has been closed long before now.

In arguing for continuationalism, exponents such as John Wesley, Charles Finney, A.B. Simpson and William J. Seymour reflect the fact that no one today can meet the criteria that would qualify them as one of the twelve disciples does not necessarily limit the gift of apostleship to the twelve.⁵⁵ They further argue that even if the gift of apostleship has ceased, if believers still believe in the operation of gifts of teaching, ruling, serving, discernment, among others, then why should the gift of tongues speaking be the only to have "disappeared" with an end to the apostolic era and not all apostolic gifts.

Continuationalists again claim that the fact that church fathers endorsed the timeless nature of the spiritual gifts is enough reason to believe that it continues to operate in our dispensation. Wilson succinctly corroborates this assertion by citing Justin Martyr: "The prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time."⁵⁶

Their opponents counter by observing that if tongues speaking was to continue, it must have been captured or pervaded most of the New Testament books, and not scanty as we have now. They analysed the writings of two of the greatest theologians, one from the Eastern and the other from the Western churches, respectively, Chrysostom and Augustine, who emphatically stated that tongues had ceased by their time and described the gift as an obscure practice.⁵⁷ It was believed that in the absence of the canonized Bible, God chose to use the gift of signs and wonders to prove a point in winning those who were on their way to perdition.

In an attempt to differentiate between glossolalia and prophecy, Turner observes that glossolalia is a sign to unbelievers whilst prophecy is a sign to believers.⁵⁸ Turner's point is backed by the fact that the most explicit form of glossolalia in the book of Acts served as a catalyst for evangelizing the unbelievers who had come to listen to them. In this sense, glossolalia has the tendency to leave unbelievers in awe, and by so doing, draw their attention to the Supreme reality. Prophecy, on the other hand, right from its outset, has in most cases been about the church or people of God, and individuals who are committed to the course of God. According to Turner, Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians suggests that tongues alone do not edify the church, but when interpreted, they serve a function similar to prophecy.⁵⁹ Turner's assertion conveys the idea that the edifying power of glossolalia hinges around its interpretive framework. Forbes submits that one prominent role Luke and Paul identified is the revelatory dimension.⁶⁰ Ruse distinguishes between glossolalia in Acts of the Apostles and Corinth by observing that, "glossolalia is chiefly "a spontaneous auditory sign of the Spirit's infilling or coming upon an individual or group of people" in the Acts of the Apostles whereas glossolalia in the Corinthian church is understood as "edifying either to the individual or the whole church, even though misused at times during church assembly."⁶¹

The accounts in Acts of the Apostles and Corinth serve complimentary purposes to give a broader picture of what glossolalia does. In the thinking of Cloud, one key fact about the Pentecost event was for God to use it as a sign in conveying to the Israelites that the gospel needed to transcend

⁵⁵ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/stewart_don/faq/speaking-in-tongues/04-what-are-the-arguments-that-the-gift-of-tongues-has-not-ceased-but-is-still-to-be-used.cfm accessed on December 2, 2023.

⁵⁶ Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, 82.

⁵⁷ John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 27.

⁵⁸ Turner as cited in Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 68.

⁵⁹ Turner as cited in Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 68.

⁶⁰ Forbes as cited in Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 68.

⁶¹ Ruse, *Embracing the Experience of Glossolalia ("Speaking in Tongues")*, 41.

the boundaries of the nation Israel.⁶² The dynamic God in the above context in his sovereignty used intelligible language in what may be termed as a modified glossolalia to use miraculous tongues as a sign to the unbelieving Jews that God was reuniting all humankind under a single spiritual body irrespective of nationality, race, tribe, language, sex, colour and other social distinctions. The gift in Cloud's thought was a unifying factor rather than a divisive one.

The idea that glossolalia is the chief evidence for the infilling of the Holy Spirit was first put forward by Charles Fox Parham and members of his Bible School in 1900.⁶³ Parham believed missionaries need not learn foreign languages but should rely on the Holy Spirit's baptism to speak and be understood, as on Pentecost.⁶⁴ In this regard, tongues speaking served as an effective tool for contextualizing the gospel. Advocating for Parham's position, Owen Carr corroborates that through the spirit of God the approximately three thousand languages spoken by humankind are available to tongue speakers.⁶⁵ Carr believes that through the divine wisdom of God one can speak any of these languages once a person enters the ecstatic condition of glossolalia.

Zoro Dube examines glossolalia through the lens of migration, suggesting that by speaking in tongues, the believer embarks on a transformative passage from their earthly surroundings to a divine realm.⁶⁶ He explains, this gives the believer a sense of being lifted from the struggles of their earthly life into a heavenly realm, where they speak in angelic languages and embrace a transcendent, celestial identity.⁶⁷ From the above assertion, one deduces that glossolalia has the tendency to alienate one from those who have no knowledge of the concept leading the believer to adopt a new identity that may appear foreign to their own community.

Cartledge likens glossolalia to the act of putting on liturgical robes to perform rituals and posits that the gift of glossolalia is exclusive to the priestly class and not comprehensible by ordinary people comparable to how sacred Latin is to the Roman Catholics.⁶⁸ Drawing from the above, tongues speaking, though not comprehensible by mere men, is spoken by men who have a good relationship with the originator of languages (God Almighty). In this regard, one who speaks in tongues transcends the physical realm to commune with the Supreme Being.⁶⁹ Edward Smith contends that after God had confounded their language leading to the proliferation of languages, it was glossolalia which served the purpose of reversing the unfortunate incident of curse. Smith emphasises that the limitation of our languages does not make us able to express vividly what we want to communicate, but with glossolalia, we communicate effectively "through a heavenly language that surpasses our mental limitations."⁷⁰ In bringing all humanity under the same grace through Jesus' atoning sacrifice, God saw it relevant to unite humankind through the powerful gift of glossolalia. Randal sees the key import of the Pentecost event as unity and mission by noting; the central connections to the image of glossolalia are its roles in fostering unity and advancing mission.⁷¹ Juxtaposing the Pentecost event and for that matter glossolalia with the confusion at Babel, God used the former to communicate the essence of unity in the Christian journey.

Joseph R. Flower observed that speaking in tongues, spirit baptism and glossolalia are intertwined.⁷² This submission follows from the fact that God is Holy, and can only operate in a vessel that has been set apart for use through Holy and moral living (2 Timothy 2:20). Setting oneself apart

⁶² David W. Cloud, *Speaking Tongues*, 19.

⁶³ Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 70.

⁶⁴ Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 71.

⁶⁵ Carr as quoted by Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 75.

⁶⁶ Zoro Dube, "Speaking in Tongues as Emigration: A Social-psychological Understanding of Tongue Speaking Using Migration Theory," *Scriptura*, 2 (2010):249-258, 250.

⁶⁷ Dube, "Speaking in Tongues as Emigration," 250.

⁶⁸ Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 76.

⁶⁹ Edward A. Smith, *The Power in Praying in Tongues* (Washington: Independent, 2020), 4.

⁷⁰ Smith, *The Power in Praying in Tongues*, 4.

⁷¹ Randal Ackland, *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Glossolalia*, (Doctorate Thesis: Bangor University, 2020), 346.

⁷² Flower as cited in Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia*, 80.

gives the congenial atmosphere for the spirit to reside and operate in the life of the believer. Ackland has posited that glossolalia connotes an imagery of mother-child intimacy.⁷³ Lawrence corroborates this assertion by observing that just as a mother understands her baby's cooing, so too are the Spirit-given, unintelligible utterances of the believer understood by God. Free from the constraints of human language, the believer communicates openly and intimately with the Divine.⁷⁴

3.2 Psycholinguistic and anthropological insights

From a psychological perspective, when a tongue-speaker is engaged in glossolalia, they are unable or cannot describe what happens in words but by analogy or figure of speech. This is typical of religious experiences. In the context of speaking in tongues, the believer can only say I have been baptized in the Holy Spirit, and the necessary sign and ultimate assurance that such an event has taken place is glossolalia.⁷⁵ This is considered as the ultimate or superlative gift of the Holy Spirit. At this point, the words uttered and the language used is supposed to be the words and the language of the Holy Spirit and not the words of the believer. In Pentecostalism, speaking in tongues or glossolalia is considered a manifestation of the mind of the Spirit of God using human speech as a means of communication. R. W. Crapps points out that a Pentecostal describes the experience of speaking in tongues as follows: "Manifestation of the mind of the Spirit of God employing human speech organs. When man is speaking with tongues, his mind, intellect, understanding are quiescent. It is the faculty of God that is active. Man's will, certainly, is active, and his spirit, and his speech organs; but the mind that is operating is the mind of God through the Holy Spirit."⁷⁶

It is interesting to note that as a result of what appears to be abnormal behaviour, as displayed in the diverse manifestation of glossolalia, a number of psychologists have attributed glossolalia to mental illness. Those who have stressed this perspective such as E. Mansell Pattison, claim that through glossolalia, individuals demonstrate "overt psychopathology of a sociopathic, hysterical or hypochondriacally nature."⁷⁷

3.3 Critics and Controversies about Glossolalia

James N. Amanze and Tino Shanduka posit that an appreciable number of psychologists contest the authenticity of tongues speaking and see glossolalia as a pathological phenomenon, "that is to say, it is part of abnormal behaviour."⁷⁸ Gleaning from the above, the fact that glossolalia is widely cherished in some Christian quarters does not rule out its rejection by some scientists who are mostly not spiritually inclined and see the phenomenon as a disorder.

The phenomenon holds a significant place within worship settings, where individuals, moved by a heightened spiritual experience, engage in spontaneous vocalisations. The practice is not exclusive to Christianity and can be found in other religious traditions, including certain indigenous rituals. Glossolalia (speaking in tongues) is a scriptural phenomenon that has its proper place in both private and public worship. While *glossolalia* is embraced and celebrated within many religious circles, it also sparks debates and controversies with some critics contesting its authenticity, attributing the phenomenon to psychological or social factors.

⁷³ Randal Ackland, *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Glossolalia*, 341.

⁷⁴ Lawrence as quoted by Ackland, *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Glossolalia*, 341.

⁷⁵ Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 17.

⁷⁶ R. W. Crapps, *An introduction to psychology of religion* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), 15.

⁷⁷ E. Mansell Pattison, "Behavioral Science Research on the Nature of Glossolalia," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 20, no. 3 (1968): 76, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/1968/JASA9-68Pattison.html/> as assessed on March 7, 2025.

⁷⁸ James N. Amanze and Tino Shanduka, "Glossolalia: Divine speech or man-made language? A psychological analysis of the gift of speaking in tongues in the Pentecostal Churches in Botswana," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 41 (1) (2015):3-19, 4.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Discourses about the relevance of glossolalia in the Christian church today offers the church an opportunity to focus on spiritual unity, mission, and responsible practice. A church's subscription to either cessationist or continuation view should lead them to prioritize the biblical principle that all spiritual gifts must serve the edification of believers and the advancement of the Gospel as affirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:12.

For churches that find glossolalia within the theological framework of their doctrinal cosmivision, it is crucial for them to ensure orderly practice in line with Paul's instructions – emphasizing interpretation and spiritual maturity (1 Cor. 14:27-28) since the God who gave out these gifts is a God of orderliness (1 Cor. 14:33). Admonishing church members to use the gift of tongues speaking responsibly in an orderly manner is a key to fostering a worship environment that includes all believers without confusion or division.

The missional purpose of glossolalia discussed above should serve as a clarion call for churches that have relegated missions to the sidelines to rethink how to reach the unchurched and unbelievers. The Acts 2 event of tongues-speaking which played a crucial role in cross-cultural communication should serve as an impetus for the church today to engage in diverse communities and break down barriers of language and culture. The linguistic set up within today's churches can also be boosted by empowering church officials, evangelists (preachers) with multilinguistic tuition so that their messages can transcend national borders. This can easily be done by means of digital ecclesiology where the evangelists primarily use the plethora of social media spaces available such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter (X), Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, inter alia, to proclaim the Good News to their audience in different languages such as French, Spanish, English, Chinese among others. Such an intervention will ensure the removal of linguistic barriers, making the salvific message accessible to all manner of people, mirroring the Pentecost event and fulfilling God's command to preach to all. Others who can afford the services of devices that translate and interpret oral and written speeches can also use them to do cross-cultural missions.

Church activities should emphasize the positive impact of glossolalia as a spiritual gift, fostering unity in diversity and deepening faith among believers. By integrating psychological and anthropological insights, the church can help society appreciate glossolalia as a divine experience rather than a mental disorder. This would help address the misconception on a cross section of believers that people fake the act of tongues speaking and by so doing highlight its role in spiritual development. Encouraging responsible practice and theological understanding will strengthen faith and inspire positive societal transformation.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The cessation versus continuation debate centres on whether spiritual gifts like glossolalia, prophecy, and healing remain active in the modern church. It is interesting, however, that glossolalia, which by definition has its origin from God can divide Christendom. While cessationists argue that these gifts ceased with the apostolic era, continuationists maintain that they persist today. Historical, theological, and experiential perspectives fuel the discussion, further complicated by psychological and anthropological insights. Settling this question conclusively is difficult because Scripture does not explicitly state that the gifts were limited to the Apostolic Church, while several passages (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:30; 14:1, 5, 39) encourage believers to earnestly seek them. With no definitive resolution, the debate invites deeper exploration into biblical interpretation, church history, and the nature of spiritual experiences. With the universal (catholic) church seeking ecumenicalism among believers, resolving the debate of whether or not glossolalia has ceased with the apostolic era is key in uniting believers. Until the universal church comes out clear on the place of glossolalia in today's church, the focus of the Pentecost event should be about how the sovereign God could use such an experience to make his word known to different nationals emphasizing the need to explore avenues of making the salvific message accessible to unbelievers irrespective of their location, nationality, social status and gender among others.

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