

# Reformed Theology – Class 7

## THE CHRISTIAN AND HIS CONDUCT, CHURCH DISCIPLINE & CHARISMATIC GIFTS

### LAW AND LIBERTY

1. When discussing the proper behavior required for God's family, it's helpful to recognize the difference between ethics and morals. Ethics is the study of what people should be doing, what is normative, imperative, and could be considered the science of "oughtness". Morality is the summary of what people are doing.
2. From the creation of man, however, God has clearly revealed to his people how they ought to live and how they would best function in His world.
  - God in the garden
  - Romans 2:14&15
3. There are three types of Biblical law the CIVIL, CEREMONIAL, and MORAL.
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  - Hebrews 10:4 tells us that the blood of the O.T. sacrifices NEVER removed our sins, but was merely a shadow of the coming sacrifice of the Lamb of God.
  - Hebrews 10:14-18 tell us that as a result of Christ's death there is no longer any need for the shedding of animal blood.
  - Ephesians 2:13-15 clearly tells us that Christ has ABOLISHED the law of commandments contained in ordinances.
  - In Acts 10 God dramatically teaches Peter that the O.T. CLEANLINESS laws were no longer applicable and that what God declared clean, no man was to declare unclean.
  - Acts 15:5-10 The Jerusalem Conference under the leadership of James clearly affirms that new covenant believers are not subject to old covenant ceremonial requirements.
4. The moral law, however, is perpetual and is still the guide for the faith and life of God's people today. In the old covenant, the people of God recognized they had an obligation to God which transcended mere outward obedience. God wanted a people who were HUMBLE and CONTRITE before him (Psalm 51:16, 17; I Samuel 15:22; Micah 6:8). Elliptical character of the law:

**TEN COMMANDMENTS POEM**  
Above all else, love God alone  
Bow down to neither wood nor stone  
God's name refuse to take in vain

The Sabbath rest, with care maintain  
Respect your parents all your days  
Hold sacred human life always  
Be loyal to your chosen mate  
Steal nothing, neither small nor great  
Report with truth your neighbor's deed  
And rid your mind of selfish greed.

- The first commandment: You shall have no other Gods before me
- The second commandment: You shall not make any graven images
- The third commandment: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain -
- The fourth commandment: Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy
- The fifth commandment: Honor your father and mother
- The sixth commandment: You shall not murder
- The seventh commandment: You shall not commit adultery
- The eighth commandment: You shall not steal
- The ninth commandment: You shall not bear false
- The tenth commandment: You shall not covet

5. The work of Christ did not ameliorate the importance of the law for He came not to destroy it, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). Romans 6:14 says that we are not under law, but under grace. When we were under the covenant of works, keeping God's law perfectly was the condition necessary to obtain life. Christ's perfect obedience, however, has fulfilled that condition and left us free from the damnation or curses of the law. The law is not our enemy anymore, it is our friend in helping us to obey the Lord we love and live productively in His world (Psalm 1).

There are three ways the law of God continues to be useful

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The law wants to inappropriately climb into the kingdom of our conscious saying we are worthless and a liar...it speaks harshly to you and condemns your life, actions, and berates you, as to why you do not measure up.

In Christ, we respond: "Know your place O law - condemn me not for I have the righteousness of Christ. Know your boundaries – do not try and climb into my conscious and condemn me. My conscious is a lady and a queen! Know your place, O law, you do well to inform me of my sin and show me how beautiful is my place in Christ, but dare you not rob me of my hope and joy. Condemn me not! Hound me no more about my lack of performance. Christ is my covering and my song of redemption. He has kept your demands perfectly. You have no voice over the hope of my heart. Do not hum your dirge of

condemnation in my presences. Show me the way of love, for in that way you are beautiful to those in Christ, but do not wag your finger of condemnation in my face. Christ has valiantly rescued me from your accusing glare and your stern look of disapproval.” Martin Luther

The gospel changes our relationship to the law – Scotty Smith Prayer (end of lesson)\*

“Finally, we turn to the law of God because sometimes we need to do things just because God says so. In the garden, God told Adam and Eve not to eat the tree, but he never told them why. Some of us simply hate to follow a direction unless we know all the reasons why the direction was given, how it will benefit us, and so on. But God was saying to Adam and Eve, I think, ‘Obey this direction, not because you understand, but because you recognize that I am your God and that you are not.’ They failed in this. But every day we have the opportunity to put this right. Do God’s will, not because it is exciting (though it will eventually be an adventure) not because it will meet your needs (though it will eventually be a joy) not because you understand why this is the path of wisdom (though it will eventually become more clear.) Do it because he is your Lord and Savior and you are not. Do it because it is the law of the Lord. And if you do it—if you obey him even in the little things—you will know God, know yourself, find God’s grace, love your neighbor, and simply honor him as God. Not a bad deal.” Tim Keller, *The Grace of the Law*.

6. One of the great principles recaptured in the Reformation was that God alone is lord of the conscience and that our consciences cannot be bound by any rule and commandment of men which is in any way contrary to His word. The apostles recognized this when they proclaimed, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

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## WORSHIP

1. The law makes it clear that God alone deserves the worship of his creatures.
2. Worship is to include only that which God prescribes in His word.

The proper elements of worship are prayer, the reading and preaching of the word, singing, sacraments, giving of offerings, and the making of vows and oaths.

3. Setting aside one day in seven to worship the Lord is a creation ordinance.
4. I believe the confession errs when it restricts recreation on the Sabbath.

## GOD AND GOVERNMENT

1. The Bible teaches that God has ordained government and given it the power of the sword as His minister to restrain and punish the evildoer and protect the innocent. Romans 13:1-7
2. The government has divine authority to wage war on just and necessary occasions.
3. Civil authorities may not interfere in matters of faith, or in any way hinder the exercise of faith among God's people.

## MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

1. God established at the creation of Eve (Genesis 2:22-25) that marriage was to be between one man and one woman and that this bond was not to be severed.
2. Marriage was instituted by God for these reasons:
  - Mutual help (Genesis 2:18).
  - Procreation (Genesis 1:28).
  - Growth of the church (Genesis 1:28; I Corinthians 7:14).
  - Prevent sin (I Corinthians 7:2-5, 9).
  - Model the character of the trinity and the love of Christ for the church (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:22).
3. God's children are not obligated to be married, in fact, some are called by God to remain single (I Corinthians 7:7-8). When Christians do marry, though, it is their duty to marry only another believer. (I Corinthians 7:39; II Corinthians 6:14-18).
4. Divorce is abhorrent to God (Malachi 2:16). Nevertheless, due to the hardness of man's heart, divorce was permitted in the O.T. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). God was regulating and mitigating an existing custom rather than setting forth the way He intended for marriage. Jesus, in one of the most conspicuous examples of His Messianic authority, abrogates the O.T. concession for divorce granted by Moses, and institutes immorality as the only cause for which a man or woman might take the initiative on pursuing divorce (Matthew 19:3-9). I Corinthians 7:12-15 also tells us that divorce is permissible when an unbeliever deserts the relationship and refuses to heed the counsel of the church to return. These are the only two Biblical grounds for divorce.
5. Remarriage is permissible when both parties are free to pursue it (I Corinthians 7:15; Matthew 5:31, 32). Determining eligibility for remarriage is sometimes difficult simply because sin complicates life. The loving application of church discipline in all cases, however, clearly aids the parties involved to know where they stand. It should be born in mind always, that converts from the date of conversion begin a new history (I Corinthians 6:9-11). God forgives sins of the basest sort and the church must also. We must ask:

- Have they sought the forgiveness of their former wife, children, relatives, and others involved?
- Have they made every effort at reconciliation (where possible)?
- Have they fulfilled all their obligations related to their possible divorce settlement, childcare, etc.?

## CHURCH DISCIPLINE

### THE NECESSITY

*“Today the contemporary church struggles with the subject of discipline. It is not popular to judge one another, nor is it an easy thing to confront one another. Many would rather ignore sin and conflict than go through the struggle of facing it and forgiving it under the proper conditions. But we cannot hope for an effective ministry in our day and neglect the necessary purification of our lives and of our fellowship...”*

*As our Western world lapses more and more into an un-Christian perspective, and as human behavior is increasingly gauged by pagan standards, it will become necessary for Christian leaders to raise the standard of holiness and Christian discipline higher. For to rationalize sin and not confront it will be to sow the seeds of ultimate destruction for congregations.”*

*Ken Gage*

*“Too often now when people join a church, they do so as consumers. If they like the product, they stay. If they do not, they leave. They can no more imagine a church disciplining them than they can a store that sells goods disciplining them. It is not the place of the seller to discipline the consumer. In our churches we have a consumer mentality.”*

*Haddon Robinson*

There are many purposes for church discipline:

Vindication of the honor of Christ; protection of the integrity of His name.

Purification of His people: “a little leaven affects the whole lump.”

Deterrence of others from like offenses.

Prevention of the wrath of God that turning a blind eye toward unrighteousness in His family would surely invite.

Reclamation of the erring brother or sister.

Maintenance of the integrity of the witness of Christ’s church.

### THE DEFINITION

Church discipline is not: Spiritual meddling, hypocritical, legalistic, unforgiving, or unloving. It is not Pharisaical or in violation of Matthew 7:1, "Judge not lest ye be not judged."

- John 21:15-23
- Acts 5:1-11
- I Corinthians 5:9 -13
- Titus 3:10 -11
- Hebrews 13:17
- James 5:19 -20

Church discipline is the act of Biblically and **LOVINGLY** confronting a brother or sister in Christ, who is in serious sin, with a view to spiritual reconciliation and restoration. It is not a powerless pretense, but the actual administration of Christ's family by His **APPOINTED REPRESENTATIVES**.

#### CHURCH MEMBERSHIP QUESTIONS:

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?
4. Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?
5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

#### THE PROCEDURE

1. Step One: "Go and reprove him in private" (Matthew 18:15) If you have knowledge of ongoing sin in the life of a fellow believer, (whether or not that sin is directly against you), you should not share your concern with others, but go promptly to that person, in a spirit of humility, with a plan to help him/her and lovingly confront the individual in private.
2. Step Two: "Take one or two or more with you" (Matthew 18:16) If after this meeting there is no expression of repentance you should then and only then share your concern with a few others whom you believe will be most effective in helping to restore this individual.

3. Step Three: “Tell it to the church” (Matthew 18:17a). If after repeated attempts by two or three people there is still no repentance, you should then and only then bring the matter before the church. This means the matter should at this point be brought before the Elders, as representatives of the church.
4. Step Four: “Let him be to you as a gentile and a tax gatherer” (Matthew 18:17b). If after repeated attempts by the Elders there is still no repentance, the Elders are then required to remove the individual from the membership roll by excommunication. The members are not to associate intimately with that person as a believer in Christ, but to be continually admonishing him/her to repent.

## THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

### Definition

The Charismatic movement claims to be the major channel of the Holy Spirit’s work in the church today. It sees itself as renewing the church by leading its reentry into the long-lost world of gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit. It includes:

- Post-conversion SPIRIT BAPTISM
- Emphasis on SIGN GIFTS - speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, knowledge, miracles
- SUPERNATURALISM
- FAITH THEOLOGY

### Positive Aspects

Though theologically flawed, the Charismatic movement is a helpful corrective for church lethargy and unbelief. Listed below are positive aspects of the Charismatic churches:

- Joyful
- Prayerful and expectant—believe God is great
- Conscious of the daily need for Holy Spirit empowerment
- Promotes congregational participation in worship as opposed to the spectator sport it is in many settings
- Every member ministry
- Missionary zeal

### Negative Aspects

- ELITISM—They are the “full gospel” churches and claim superiority over all non-charismatics.
- EMOTIONALISM—Much charismatic worship is characterized by great emotion, and the

amount of emotion is sometimes the test of whether or not it is genuine.

- EXPERIENTIAL—What a person has experienced may be the standard of what is true rather than the Scriptures being the final authority.
- DIRECT REVELATION—In many charismatic circles, “words of knowledge” are taken as divine revelation from God. This practice undermines the sufficiency of the Bible as our only guide for faith and life.
- GIFT SUPERIORITY—The measure of a person’s spirituality is the number of gifts they possess, especially the supernatural gifts such as tongues and healing.
- DEMON OBSESSION—Satan and his minions are stressed as the major source of man’s sin problem, rather than his own heart. Often it is taught that if we can “bind” Satan and his demons, much of our sin would be eradicated.
- DISILLUSIONMENT—In some circles it is taught that if we have enough faith, we can get God to do anything we want. In this “name it and claim it” theology, faith becomes a power we use to get God to do our bidding. Unfortunately, verses such as Matthew 18:19 are taken out of their context (church discipline) as blanket promises of what God will do, and can harm a person’s faith when they believe that God just didn’t come through if the prayer is answered “no”.

## CRITIQUE

### Holy Spirit Baptism

Scriptures teach that every believer is baptized by the Holy Spirit at conversion. There is no “second blessing” (I Corinthians 12:13; Romans 8:9). The sole reason that the first disciples had a “two stage” experience, believing first and being spirit baptized after, was their conversion predated the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Their experience was unique and not a norm for us.

### Tongues Speaking

- New Testament Tongues were foreign languages. The miraculous gift of tongues experienced in the New Testament was the speaking of foreign languages by men who did not know them. (Acts 2:6) These tongues were not unknown or unintelligible, they were clear and translatable languages. These tongues were given by God and not learned.
- New Testament Tongues were a sign to unbelieving Jews. They served as a signal from God that there was a dramatic change in His redemptive work (I Corinthians 14:22). God doesn’t often surprise his people with something totally unexpected. He told his people in the Old Testament what was coming. Three times tongues are mentioned in the Old Testament and each indicates that they were a sign of judgment on Israel (Isaiah 28:9-11; Deuteronomy 28:49; Jeremiah 5:15).
- The tongues of foreigners in Israel will represent the arrival of God’s judgment. It is a sign they have persisted too long in rejection of God’s word clearly revealed to them. When the unrepentant nation hears men who have invaded speaking foreign languages, they



must recognize it as a sign that God is judging them, as he once did with invading armies.

- What is the change God was making when He introduced tongues at the beginning of the new covenant era? God was indicating that He would no longer speak as a single language to a single people. He will speak all the languages of the world to all the peoples of the world. Tongues, therefore, mark a dramatic change in the direction of God's work and a distinctive judgment on Israel (Matthew 21:43).
- New Testament Tongues were for public consumption, not private use. All gifts of the spirit are for the benefit of Christ's Church. Rudimentary to the whole concept of gifts is the fact that they are not for private use, but to edify the body of Christ. I Corinthians 12:4-7, "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."
- Paul condemns the Corinthian practice of tongue speaking because this gift was not being used to properly edify the whole body. I Corinthians 14:26-28, "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two --or at the most three-- should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God." Paul is clear that the tongues speaker without an interpreter should remain silent.
- Nowhere in the New Testament is any mention made of private tongue speaking. Tongues were a gift for the church and were to be exercised in the public assembly of the church alone.
- New Testament Tongues were revelational. In I Corinthians 14:2 Paul says, "He who speaks in a tongue utters mysteries." A "mystery" in the New Testament is a truth about God's way of redemption that was once concealed but now is revealed (Matthew 13:11, Romans 11:25, 16:25; Corinthians 2:1, 15:51; Ephesians 1:9).
- God is not concealing truth by speaking mysteries, but by divine revelation is making his truth known. Tongues were an instrument for communicating revelation, a means of God to reveal redemptive truth that was once hidden.
- Tongues need to be understood as a subset of prophecy. The message delivered in a tongue is brought up to the level of divinely inspired prophecy, once the tongue has been interpreted (I Corinthians 14:4, 5; Acts 2:17 - Joel predicts "prophecy" -- Peter says Pentecost is the fulfillment).
- New Testament Tongues were temporary. Inherent in the nature of a sign is its temporary character. A sign marking a curve in the road is no longer needed once the change of direction is made. Once the world might have presumed that Christianity was exclusively a Jewish religion. Tongues illustrated dramatically the universal character of God's plan. Despite its clearly Jewish origins, Christianity was exclusively Jewish no longer.
- The church also no longer needs the new revelation of divine truth that tongues would supply. No further prophetic word is needed because the fullness of God's revelation is

contained in the scriptures. This may well be what Paul refers to in I Corinthians 13:8-10 when he says, "Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophecy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears."

- With the conclusion of the apostolic age, tongue speaking ceased. The "perfect" had come and God's revelation to his church was complete.

Can Charismatic glossolalia, which is frequently a learned skill (loosen jaw and tongue, speak nonsense syllables, utter as praise to God the first sounds that come, and so forth), is not a foreign language, is not a sign to Israel, is not revelation and is regarded by its practitioners as mainly for private use, be equated with the tongues of the Bible? The answer is surely not.

### Faith Healing

Scriptures tell us that Jesus and the apostles healed directly with their word (Matthew 8:5-13; 9:6-7; John 4:46-53; Acts 9:34) or their touch (Mark 1:41; 5:25-34; Acts 28:8). Their healing was instant (Mark 8:13; 5:29; Luke 6:10; 17:24; John 5:9; Acts 3:7). Crippled limbs were healed and on occasion, even the dead were raised (Luke 7:11-15; 8:49-55; John 11:1-44; Acts 9:36-41). There is no record that they ever attempted to heal without success (except where the disciples failed to pray, Mark 9:17-29). Their healings always lasted. Can charismatic healing ministries be equated with the healing gifts demonstrated by Jesus and the apostles? Surely not. The N.T. references to unhealed sickness among church leaders makes it plain that good health at all times is not God's will for all believers.

- Philippians 2:27
- I Timothy 5:23
- II Timothy 4:20
- II Corinthians 12:7-10

### Faith Theology

One of the most destructive aspects of Charismatic influence has been the avocation of a prosperity doctrine. As James Tinny advocated it, "God's got it, I can have it, and by faith I'm going to get it." The followers are told that God's will for them is health and financial prosperity. They are taught, based on Isaiah 53:5, that Jesus' death has freed us from sickness and poverty and we need to think, visualize, imagine, claim, and believe into being what is rightfully ours in Christ. Kenneth Hagin, commenting on Christ's remark, "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it," asserts "Here, the Greek word translated 'ask' means 'demand'... let that soak in a little. You're not demanding anything of the Father...You're demanding it of the Devil." This Charismatic emphasis indicates that they have not grasped the link between what Christ was in his state of humiliation and what his people are called to be.

- Luke 14:25-33
- John 15:18-26

- Acts 14:22
- Hebrews 11:32-40; 12:1-11

Jesus calls us to a life of self-denial, in a world where we will be persecuted and hounded for our faith. Ironically enough this lack of humility and selflessness is a Spirit-frustrating, Spirit-grieving, and Spirit-quenching feature right at the heart of this supposedly Spirit-exalting movement and sheds light on its frequent tendency to start with a bang but run out of gas.

*\*Credit should be given to J.I. Packer's, Keep In Step With the Spirit, for much of the information in this section.*

### **Reading Assignment**

1. Read Essential Truths of the Christian Faith, (Sproul), sections 37-43 and 84-96.
2. Read the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapters 19-24 & 30 (chapter 24 - first one only on page 69).

## THE GOSPEL CHANGES OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAW

“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. Psalm 19:7-10

Dear heavenly Father, apart from the gospel, there’s no way I would be able to join King David in singing this robust praise-song about loving your law. Indeed, if Jesus hadn’t offered his law-keeping as my own, and if he hadn’t taken my law-breaking as his own, I would not be singing, I would be despairing.

For apart from the gospel, the law didn’t revive me, it condemned me. Apart from the gospel, it didn’t give joy to my heart, it brought terror to my soul. Apart from the gospel, the law wasn’t like the sunshine lighting my way, it was like a searchlight exposing my sin.

The law didn’t lead me to fear you with an affectionate reverence, but to be afraid of you with a guilty conscience. Apart from the gospel, I didn’t value the law like precious gold, I avoided it like a deadly plague. It wasn’t sweeter than honey from the comb, but more bitter than zest from a lemon.

O, but Father, when the law drove me to Jesus—when you gave me faith to trust Jesus as my forgiveness and my righteousness, everything began to change. I’m now learning to love your law... as Fatherly instruction to his beloved children—as a revelation of the good, the true and the beautiful, NOT as a formula for merit, acceptance and favor. What a difference... what a life-giving liberty-fueling difference!

Father, may the gospel continue to free me from “cheap-grace” which ignores your law, and from grace-less legalism which ignores your Son. I want to continue growing in the obedience of faith and love... until the Day when Jesus, who has perfectly fulfilled the law for me, perfectly fulfills the law in me. So very Amen, I pray, in His holy and loving name.”

By Scotty Smith

# The Grace of The Law

January

2009

by Tim Keller

At Redeemer we talk a lot about how we are saved by grace, not by our good works or obedience to the law. Indeed, Paul says we are not 'under law' but 'under grace' (Romans 6:15.) But what does that mean as far as having an obligation to submit to God's will as written in his Word? Do we still have to obey the law? Absolutely.

To be 'under the law' refers not to law obeying but law relying (Galatians 3:10-11). When we think we can win God's approval through our moral performance and obedience becomes a crushing burden, then we are 'under law.' But when we learn that Christ has fulfilled the law for us and that now we who believe in him are secure in God's love, then we naturally want to delight, resemble, and know the One who has done this. How can we do this? By turning to the law! Paul puts it this way. Though he is not under the law, 'I am not free from God's law, but I am under Christ's law' (1 Corinthians 9:21.) Though he is not 'under' the law (as a way to earn salvation) he now is freed to see the beauties of God's law as fulfilled in Christ, and submits to it as way of loving his Savior. How does this work?

First, we embrace the law of God in order to learn more about who our God really is. Leviticus 19 is a magnificent chapter which both expands on all the Ten Commandments, and also summarizes them into 'love your neighbor as yourself.' It shows how God's law was not a matter only of ritual purity, but was to transform every corner of one's practical life. In Leviticus 19:2, however, God introduces the whole law by saying, 'be holy, for I am holy.' In other words, if you want to know who I am, what I love and hate, if you want to know my heart and become like me, obey my law.

Second, we embrace the law of God in order to discover our true selves. Deuteronomy says, "What does the Lord require of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you this day for your good?" Here we see that the law of God is a gift of grace that is the foundation of human flourishing. It is not "busywork" assigned just to please the arbitrary whims of a capricious deity. The law of God simply shows us what human beings were built to do—to worship God alone, to love their neighbors as themselves, to tell the truth, keep their promises, forgive everything, act with justice. When we move against these laws we move against our own natures and happiness. Disobedience to God sets up strains in the fabric of reality that can only lead to break down.

Third, we understand the law of God as fulfilled in Christ. This means two things. One we already mentioned. Christ completely fulfilled the requirements of the law in our place, so when he took the penalty our sins deserved, we could receive the blessing that his righteousness deserved (2

Corinthians 5:21.) However, we also recognize that many parts of the Old Testament law no longer relate directly to us as believers. Since Jesus is the ultimate priest, temple, and sacrifice, we observe none of the ceremonial, dietary, and other laws connected to ritual purity. Also, Christians of all nations are now members of the people of God, and God's community no longer exists as a single nation-state under a theocratic government. Therefore, the 'civil legislation' of the Old Testament is no longer appropriate. Adultery in the Old Testament was punishable by a death, but in the New Testament it is dealt with through exhortation and church discipline (1 Corinthians 6-7.)

Fourth, we realize that the law's painful, convicting work is ultimately a gracious thing. When we fully comprehend the kind of life the law requires of us, it can be intimidating. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus expounds the Ten Commandments in this comprehensive way. He shows us the attitude we should have to the world, being salt and light, investing ourselves in the needs of our communities. He shows us that if we even disdain and ignore our neighbors, calling them 'fools', we are attacking their creator, in whose image they are made. He calls us to never look on another with lust, living lives of purity and chastity. He insists we should speak with as much honesty in all our daily interactions as if we were testifying in court under oath. We are told to forgive and love our enemies, turning the other cheek rather than seeking revenge. We are to give to the poor without expecting any thanks or acclaim. We are to give our money away in astonishing proportions, and carry on a dynamic, secret, inner prayer life. We are never to be judgmental or condemning of others, and we are to live a life free from worry. One minister said, after reading through Matthew 5-7 carefully, "God save us all from the Sermon on the Mount!" If you listen at all to the law of God, you will feel naked and exposed, ashamed and helpless, and you will seek out the mercy of God. That is why Paul says that though the law, when listened to, is devastating (Romans 7:9-11) it is nevertheless 'spiritual, righteous, and good'

(Romans 7:12, 14) and its work is ultimately gracious (Romans 7:7.) It acts as a kind but strict schoolmaster who leads us to Christ (Galatians 3:24.)

Fifth, we turn to the law of God in order to get a true definition of what it means to love others in our relationships and in society as a whole. There was once a school of ethics called 'situation ethics' that rejected the Biblical law as too rigid. Instead, we were told, we only need to always do the loving thing, what is best for the person. But this begs the question—'how do you know what is the best thing for a person?' Is sleeping together with someone before marriage the best thing or the worst thing for him or her? How do you know? The law is God's way of saying, 'If you want to love others, act this way. I created people. I know what the best thing for them is.' That is why Paul could write:

The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Romans 13:9-10

The law of God, then, gives Christians guidance not only in personal relationships, but helps us as we seek to make our society a more just and merciful one. What do people need? What does it mean to treat people with dignity? The law informs Christians' political and social involvement.

Finally, we turn to the law of God because sometimes we need to do things just because God says so. In the garden, God told Adam and Eve not to eat the tree, but he never told them why. Some of us simply hate to follow a direction unless we know all the reasons why the direction was given, how it will benefit us, and so on. But God was saying to Adam and Eve, I think, 'Obey this direction, not because you understand, but because you recognize that I am your God and that you are not.' They failed in this. But every day we have the opportunity to put this right. Do God's will, not because it is exciting (though it will eventually be an adventure) not because it will meet your needs (though it will eventually be a joy) not because you understand why this is the path of wisdom (though it will eventually become more clear.) Do it because he is your Lord and Savior and you are not. Do it because it is the law of the Lord. And if you do it—if you obey him even in the little things—you will know God, know yourself, find God's grace, love your neighbor, and simply honor him as God. Not a bad deal.



# What about Prophecy and Tongues Today?

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

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The Westminster Confession of Faith, insisting that Scripture is sufficient in our day, holds that "those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people" have "now ceased" (1.1). We who adhere to that doctrine are thus often called "cessationists." That label carries a lot of baggage. By itself, it's negative. In current debates about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it suggests what one is *against*. At the outset, then, we need to correct certain misconceptions about "cessationism."

We do not assert that God's Spirit is no longer actively working in dynamic and dramatic ways. We earnestly believe that he is. What, for instance, can be more powerful and impressive—even miraculous!—than the 180-degree reversal that occurs when the Spirit transforms those dead in their sins into those alive for good works? This involves nothing less than a work of resurrection, of (re-)creation (Eph. 2:1-10). This is awesome indeed!

Nor do we believe that all spiritual gifts have ceased and are no longer present in the church. At issue is the cessation of a limited number of such gifts. The continuation of the large remainder is not in dispute.

People sometimes tell me, "You're putting the Holy Spirit in a box." At least two responses come to mind. First, I do take this charge to heart. It is by no means an imaginary danger that we might unduly limit our expectations of the Spirit's work by our theologizing. We must always remember the incalculability factor that Jesus notes in John 3:8 (the Spirit is like an unpredictable wind). Any sound doctrine of the Spirit's work will be content with an unaccounted-for remainder, an area of mystery.

Secondly, however, as I will try to show, the Holy Spirit himself, "speaking in the Scripture" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.10), puts his activity "in a box," if you will—a box of his own sovereign making. The Bible knows nothing of a pure whimsy of the Spirit. The Spirit is indeed the Spirit of *ardor*, but he is also, and no less, the Spirit of *order* (1 Cor. 14:33, 40). It's striking that Scripture particularly stresses order in a discussion of spiritual gifts! A perennial challenge to the church is to seek this ordered ardor—or, if you prefer, this ardor-infused order of the Spirit.

## First the Foundation, Then the Superstructure

According to the Nicene Creed, the "one holy catholic" church is also "apostolic." What does that mean? What constitutes the apostolicity of the church? Getting a biblical answer to that question is the important first step toward seeing that God's Word teaches that certain gifts of the Spirit have in fact fulfilled their purpose and ceased.

Ephesians 2:11-22 provides as comprehensive an outlook on the New Testament church as any passage in Paul's writings or, for that matter, in the rest of Scripture. Using a favorite biblical metaphor (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-8), Paul says that the church—composed now of Gentiles as well as Jews—is the great house-building project that God, the master architect-builder, is constructing in the period between Christ's exaltation and his return. The church is "God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (vss. 19-20).

Two closely related considerations are noteworthy in this description. First, notice that the foundation in view is finished. It is a historically completed entity. When a builder knows what he's



doing (as we may assume God does!), he lays the foundation once at the beginning of the project. The foundation doesn't need to be repeatedly relaid. After he lays the foundation, he builds the superstructure on that foundation. From our vantage point today, we are in the period of superstructure-building. Christ has laid the foundation of his church. Now he is building on it.

Secondly, this conclusion is reinforced when we consider exactly how the apostles and prophets, along with Christ, are the church's foundation. For Christ, that plainly consists in his saving work, in his crucifixion and resurrection—"no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11; cf. 15:3-4). But the apostles also belong to the foundation. That is not because the saving work of Christ is somehow incomplete. It is rather because of their *witness*, a witness—authorized by the exalted Christ himself—which is fully revelatory (e.g., Acts 1:22; Gal. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:13).

This unique role of the apostles in God's historical unfolding of his saving plan comes to light in Ephesians 2:20. We find a correlation all through the history of salvation to its consummation in Christ (Heb. 1:1-2)—God's *word* focuses on God's *deeds*. And so the situation is this: to the foundational once-for-all, finished work of Christ, God joined the foundational once-for-all, finished apostolic witness to that work. God's word focuses on God's deeds. This was the matrix for the eventual emergence of the books of the New Testament.

Ephesians 2:20, then, indicates that the apostles had a temporary, noncontinuing role in the life of the church. Their place was in the important foundation-laying phase of the church's history. Their function was to provide revelatory, infallibly authoritative, canonical witness to the consummation of salvation history in Christ's finished work. That function was fulfilled. It does not belong to the superstructure-building period to follow. It instead provides the completed foundation on which Christ continues to build the superstructure of the church.

Several other lines of New Testament teaching confirm that the office of apostle was temporary. In order for someone to be an apostle, one job prerequisite was to have been an eye and ear witness of Christ before his ascension (Acts 1:21-26). Paul—in 1 Corinthians 15:7-9 (cf. 9:1)—saw himself as meeting this requirement by way of an exception. Along with that, he seems clearly to say here that he is the last of the apostles.

The Pastoral Epistles were largely concerned with making apostolic preparation for the future of the church after the time of the apostles. Two of these letters are addressed to Timothy, whom Paul viewed, more than anyone else in the New Testament, as his personal successor. Yet Paul never called him an apostle. In light of the redemptive-historical rationale already noted, "apostolic succession" in a personal sense is a contradiction in terms. The apostolicity of the church is not secured by an unbroken, outward succession of officeholders that can be traced back to the apostles. It rather consists in steadfast fidelity to the apostles' teaching or tradition (2 Thess. 2:15) as it is inscripturated in the New Testament.

Many in the charismatic movement agree that apostles—in the sense of those who are "first" among the gifts given to the church (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11), like the Twelve and Paul—are not present in the church today. In that respect at least—whether or not they realize it—the large majority of today's charismatics are in fact "cessationists." Anyone who recognizes the temporary nature of the apostolate, then, needs to think through—in the light of other New Testament teaching—what further implications this basic cessationist position may carry.

### **What about Prophecy?**

Ephesians 2:20 itself states one such implication—an important one. It affirms that the *prophets*, along with the apostles, have a foundational role. Who are these prophets? Clearly, they are not the Old Testament prophets. First of all, notice the word order: "apostles and prophets," not "prophets

and apostles." More importantly, just a few verses later and in almost identical words, the prophets in view are said to belong to the "now" of the new covenant, in contrast to the "other generations" of past covenant history (Eph. 3:5). Some have recently argued that these prophets are identical to the apostles ("the apostles who are also prophets"). This view is hardly plausible in view of Paul's next reference to apostles and prophets beyond this context (Eph. 4:11: "some to be apostles, some to be prophets"). Ephesians 2:20 clearly implies that prophecy was a temporary gift, given for the foundation-laying period of the church. Therefore, along with the apostles, the New Testament prophets are no longer a present part of the church's life.

### **What about Tongues?**

1 Corinthians 14 deals with prophecy and tongues in far more detail than any other New Testament passage. A quick perusal will show that, like a backbone, a contrast between prophecy and tongues structures the entire chapter (beginning in verses 2-3, continuing throughout, and culminating in verse 39). The broad concern of the apostle's argument is to show the relative superiority or preferability of prophecy to tongues. Prophecy is "greater" because (as speech intelligible to others) it edifies the church, while tongues (unintelligible to others) do not. The immediate proviso, however, is that when tongues are interpreted, they are on a par with prophecy for edifying others (vss. 4-5). Tongues, when uninterpreted, are eclipsed by prophecy. But interpreted tongues are functionally equivalent to prophecy. And so God's Word draws a close tie between prophecy and tongues. We may even say fairly that tongues, as interpretable and to be interpreted (vss. 13, 27), are a mode of prophecy.

What these two gifts have in common, and the reason they can be contrasted in this way, is that both are *word* gifts. Specifically, both are *revelation*. Both bring God's word to the church in the primary, original, nonderivative sense.

Verse 30 states explicitly that prophecy is revelation. It is also clear, among other considerations, from the only instances of prophecy in the New Testament, those of Agabus (see Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11) and the book of Revelation (see Rev. 1:1-3).

That tongues are revelation is plain from verses 14-19. They are inspired speech of the most immediate—indeed, virtually unmediated—kind. In its exercise, the gift of tongues completely bypasses the "mind," in the sense that the intellect of the speaker does not produce what is said. The Holy Spirit so takes over speech capacity and organs that the words spoken are not the speaker's own words in any sense. Also, by speaking of their content as "mysteries" (vs. 2), Paul confirms the fully revelatory character of tongues (as well as their link with prophecy, see 13:2). Elsewhere in the New Testament, at least without any clear exceptions, this word always refers to revelation—more specifically, to the redemptive-historical content of revelation (e.g., Matt. 13:11; Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Tim. 3:16).

From those passages that are most pertinent and decisive, then, a basic explanation for the cessation of prophecy and tongues emerges. By God's wise and gracious design, apostles and prophets played a temporary role in the church's history. They did not continue after its foundation was laid. The redemptive-historical "specs" of God's church-house are such that apostles and prophets are not permanent fixtures (Eph. 2:20). Neither are tongues, since they are tied, as we have seen, to prophecy (1 Cor. 14). They, too, passed out of the life of the church, along with the passing of the apostles and prophets (and other means of bringing God's word).

### **What about 1 Corinthians 13:8-13?**

Many, however, judge that 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 clearly teaches that prophecy and tongues will not cease until the second coming of Christ. To them, this is a "gotcha" text that by itself settles the issue. But does this passage really imply their conclusion?



Look carefully at 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. Notice that its primary thrust is to compare the believer's present and future knowledge. Present knowledge is partial and obscure (vss. 8-9), in contrast to the full, "face-to-face" knowledge that will be ours (vs. 12) with the arrival of "perfection" or perfect knowledge (vs. 10). This "perfection" almost certainly will arrive when Christ returns in power and glory. Does that mean that these gifts will not cease until the Second Coming?

That conclusion goes beyond the aim of this text. The accent of this text is on the *character* of our present knowledge—in particular, on its partial quality. The particular media of that knowledge are not the point. Paul clearly had a pastoral concern with the proper exercise of prophecy and tongues in the church at Corinth (chapters 12-14). Therefore, it's understandable that he mentioned them in this context. He was not, however, addressing the issue of *when* they would cease. Rather, he was stressing the partial, opaque character of all our knowledge until Christ returns. This is true no matter by which revelatory means that knowledge comes (including, by implication, even inscripturation). This is also true no matter when those means may cease.

Ephesians 4:11-13 reinforces this interpretation. The exalted Christ "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, ... until we all reach unity in the faith ... and become mature [*or*; perfect], attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Almost certainly the "unity" and "fullness" of verse 13 is the same state of affairs as the "perfection" in 1 Corinthians 13:10. Ephesians 4:13 perhaps echoes 1 Corinthians 13:10 as well by its use of the word "perfect" or "mature." This is the situation Christ brings by his return. Since that is so, if we read Ephesians 4 as noncessationists insist we should read 1 Corinthians 13, we are left with the unavoidable conclusion that there will be apostles, as well as prophecy and tongues, until the second coming of Christ. Even many noncessationists, however, rightly reject this conclusion.

But how can they consistently do so? In terms of gifts, in relation to the ultimate goal in view, how is this passage any different than 1 Corinthians 13:8-13? Noncessationists who correctly recognize that there are no apostles in the sense of Ephesians 2:20 and 4:11 today can't have it both ways. If these passages teach that prophecy/prophets and tongues continue until the Second Coming, then they also teach that the apostles do as well. But a more sound understanding is simply to recognize that these passages do not even address the question of whether or not prophecy or tongues (or any other gift) will cease before the Second Coming. They leave it an open question, to be settled by other passages.

A dilemma confronts noncessationists. If prophecy and tongues (as they function in the New Testament) continue today, then the noncessationist is faced with the quite practical and troublesome implication that Scripture alone is *not* a sufficient verbal revelation from God. At best, the canon is *relatively* closed. Alternatively, if—as most noncessationists insist—"prophecy" and "tongues" today are not revelatory or are less than fully revelatory, then these contemporary phenomena are misnamed. They are something *other* than the gifts of prophecy and tongues that we find in the New Testament. Noncessationists are caught in a redemptive-historical anachronism. They are seeking within the *superstructure-building* phase of the church's history that which belonged to its *foundation-laying* phase. They are involved in the contradictory effort of trying to maintain that the New Testament canon is complete and closed and yet at the same time that the revelatory gifts for the open canon period—gifts for when the New Testament documents were still being written—continue.

But God's Word lifts us out of this dilemma. It shows us that by God's wise and gracious design, prophecy and tongues have completed their task and have ceased. What remains, supremely and solely sufficient and authoritative until Jesus comes, is "the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:10).

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# Why I Am a Cessationist

JANUARY 22, 2014 | THOMAS SCHREINER

**Editors' note:** See also Sam Storms's companion article, "[Why I Am a Continuationist](#)."

I am not writing on this topic because I have the final answer on spiritual gifts, for the matter is difficult and Christians who love God and the Bible disagree. Readers should know that Sam Storms and I are friends. We love one another, even though we differ on a secondary or tertiary issue, while at the same time upholding the importance of truth. Over the years I've become convinced that some of the so-called charismatic gifts are no longer given and that they aren't a regular feature of life in the church. I am thinking particularly of the gifts of apostleship, prophecy, tongues, healing, and miracles (and perhaps discernment of spirits).

Why would anyone think that some of the gifts have been withdrawn? I will argue that such a reading fits best with Scripture and experience. Scripture takes priority over experience, for it is the final authority, but Scripture must also correlate with life, and our experiences should provoke us to re-examine afresh whether we've read the Bible rightly. None of us reads the Bible in a vacuum, and hence we must return to the Scriptures repeatedly to ensure we've read them faithfully.

## Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets

Paul says the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets" ([Eph. 2:20](#)). I conclude that all we need to know for salvation and sanctification has been given to us through the teaching of the apostles and prophets, and that this teaching is now found in the Scriptures. Now that God has spoken in the last days through his Son ([Heb. 1:2](#)), we don't need further words from him to explain what Jesus Christ has accomplished in his ministry, death, and resurrection. Instead, we are "to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all" through the apostles and prophets ([Jude 3](#)).

To put it another way, we don't have apostles like Paul and Peter and John anymore. They gave us the authoritative teaching by which the church continues to live to this day, and that is the only teaching we will need until Jesus returns. We know that new apostles won't appear since Paul specifically says he was the last apostle ([1 Cor. 15:8](#)). And when James the brother of John died ([Acts 12:2](#)), he wasn't replaced. Apostles, in the technical sense, are restricted to those who have seen the risen Lord and have been commissioned by him, and no one since apostolic times fits such criteria. The apostles were uniquely appointed for the early days of the church to establish orthodox doctrine. There is no warrant, then, for saying there are still apostles today. Indeed, if anyone claims to be an apostle today we should be concerned, for such a claim opens the door to false teaching and to abuse of authority.



If the gift of apostleship has ended, then other gifts may have ceased as well, since the foundation has been laid by the apostles and prophets ([Eph. 2:20](#)). I conclude from this point that the gift of prophecy has ended also, for the prophets identified here are the same sort mentioned elsewhere (cf. [1 Cor. 12:28](#); [Eph. 3:5](#); [4:11](#)). The early churches didn't have the complete canon of Scripture for some time, and hence an authoritative and infallible prophetic ministry was needed to lay the foundation for the church in those early days.

The most significant biblical argument against what I'm saying is the claim that New Testament (NT) prophecy differs from Old Testament (OT) prophecy, for some say OT prophecy is flawless but NT prophecy is mixed with error. But the idea that NT prophets could make mistakes isn't persuasive for several reasons. 1.) The burden of proof is on those who say prophecy in the NT is of a different nature than prophecy in the OT. Prophets in the OT were only considered prophets of God if they were infallible ([Deut. 18:15-22](#)), and the same is almost certainly true in the NT. 2.) The admonition to judge prophecies instead of prophets ([1 Cor. 14:29-32](#); [1 Thess. 5:19-20](#)) is often adduced to show that the gift is different in the NT. But this argument is not convincing, for the only way to judge prophets in both Testaments is by their prophecies. We only know prophets aren't from God if their prophecies are false or if their words contradict scriptural teaching. 3.) We have no example of a NT prophet who erred. Agabus didn't make a mistake in prophesying that Paul would be bound by the Jews and handed over to the Romans ([Acts 21:10-11](#)). To say he erred demands more precision than prophecies warrant. Furthermore, after Paul was arrested he appealed to the words of Agabus, saying he was handed over to the Romans by the Jews ([Acts 28:17](#)), so it's clear he didn't think Agabus made a mistake. Agabus spoke the words of the Holy Spirit ([Acts 11:28](#); [21:11](#)), so we have no example in the NT of prophets whose prophecies were mixed with error.

Some object that my view of prophecy is off target since there were hundreds and thousands of prophecies in NT times that never made it into the canon. That objection doesn't convince, however, for the same was true in the OT. Most of the prophecies of Elijah and Elisha were never written down or inscripturated. Or we can think of the 100 prophets spared by Obadiah ([1 Kings 18:4](#)). Apparently none of their prophecies was inscripturated. Nevertheless, the prophecies were all completely true and unmixed with error, for otherwise they wouldn't have been prophets ([Deut. 18:15-22](#)). The same principle applies to the prophecies of NT prophets. Their words aren't recorded for us, but if they were truly prophets then their words were infallible.

What some people today call "prophecies" are actually impressions from God. He can use impressions to guide and lead us, but they aren't infallible and must always be tested by Scripture. We should also consult with wise counselors before acting on such impressions. I love my charismatic brothers and sisters, but what they call "prophecy" today isn't actually the biblical gift of prophecy. God-given impressions aren't the same thing as prophecies.

## **What About Tongues?**

The gift of tongues is a more difficult issue. In Acts (2:1-4; 10:44-48; 19:1-7) this gift signifies that the age of fulfillment has arrived where God's covenant promises are being realized. [First Corinthians 14:1-5](#) and [Acts 2:17-18](#) also suggest that interpreted (or understood) tongues are equivalent to prophecy. It seems, then, that prophecy and tongues are closely related. If prophecy has passed away, then tongues have likely ended as well. Further, it's clear from Acts that the gift involves speaking in foreign languages ([Acts 2](#)), and Peter emphasizes in the case of Cornelius and his friends that the Gentiles received the same gift as the Jews ([Acts 11:16-17](#)).

Nor is it persuasive to say the gift in [1 Corinthians 12-14](#) is of a different nature (i.e., ecstatic utterances). The word *tongues* (*glōssa*) denotes a linguistic code, a structured language, not random and free vocalization. When Paul says no one understands those speaking in tongues because they utter mysteries ([1 Cor. 14:2](#)), he isn't suggesting that the gift is different from what we find in Acts. Those hearing the tongues in Acts understood what was being said because they knew the languages the apostles were speaking. If no one knows the language, then the tongue speaker utters mysteries. Nor does [1 Corinthians 13:1](#) (tongues of angels) support the notion that the gift of tongues consists of ecstatic utterances. Paul engages in hyperbole in [1 Corinthians 13:1-3](#). He's clearly exaggerating when referring to the gift of prophecy ([1 Cor. 13:2](#)), for no one who prophesies knows "all mysteries and all knowledge."

I believe what's happening in charismatic circles today regarding tongues is similar to what we saw with prophecy. The gift is redefined to include free vocalization, and then people claim to have the gift described in Scripture. In doing so they redefine the gift to accommodate contemporary experience. So are contemporary tongues demonic, then? I don't think so. I agree with J. I. Packer that the experience is more a form of psychological relaxation.

## Miracles and Healings

What about miracles and healings? First, I believe God still heals and does miraculous things today, and we should pray for such. Scripture isn't as clear on this matter, and thus these gifts could exist today. Still, the primary function of these gifts was to accredit the gospel message, confirming that Jesus was both Lord and Christ. I doubt the gift of miracles and healings exists today, for it isn't evident that men and women in our churches have such gifts. Certainly God can and does heal at times, but where are the people with these gifts? Claims for miracles and healings must be verified, just as the people verified the blind man's healing in [John 9](#). There is a kind of biblically warranted skepticism.

Now, could God in cutting-edge missionary situations grant miracles and signs and wonders to accredit the gospel as he did in apostolic times? Yes. But that's not the same thing as having these gifts as a regular feature in the ongoing life of the church. If the signs and wonders of the apostles have returned, we should see the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, and the dead being raised. God heals today (sometimes dramatically), but the healing of colds, the flu, TMJ, stomach, and back problems, and so forth aren't in the same category as the healings found in the Scriptures. If people truly have the gift of healing and miracles today, they need to demonstrate such by performing the kinds of healings and miracles found in the Bible.

## Doesn't 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 Contradict Your View?

Let's consider an objection to the notion that some of the gifts have ceased. Doesn't [1 Corinthians 13:8-12](#) teach that the gifts last until Jesus comes again? Certainly this text teaches that the gifts could last until Jesus returns. There's no definitive teaching in the Bible that they've ceased. We might even expect them to last until the second coming. But we see hints from [Ephesians 2:20](#) and other texts that the gifts played a foundational role. I conclude, then, that [1 Corinthians 13:8-12](#) permits but doesn't require the gifts to continue until the second coming. And the gifts as they are practiced today don't fit with the biblical description of these gifts.

For reasons like these the Reformers and most of the Protestant tradition until the 20th century believed the gifts had ceased. I conclude that both Scripture and experience verify their judgment on the matter.

# Tongues Today?

*O. Palmer Robertson*

The question of ‘tongues’ in the church today continues to be a source of great difference of opinion. Some people are most enthusiastic. Others are quite certain that the current phenomenon represents Satan’s work in the midst of the church. Most evangelical believers simply don’t know what to think or how to respond.

How do you decide among these various opinions? You cannot deny that something called ‘tongues-speaking’ is occurring in the church today. But how do you reach a sound conclusion about its significance?

By the study of Scripture, of course. Certainly it is important to be sensitive to the religious experiences of various people. But ultimately all religious experience must stand the objective test of Scripture. The greatest favour that may be shown to Christian friends is to call them to test their experience by Scripture. For ‘iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend’ (*Prov. 27:17*).

The possibility of a ‘fresh look’ at the subject of tongues in Scripture may be viewed with scepticism in the light of the flood of material already available on the subject. But the effort must be made for exegetical re-evaluation.

In the New Testament only two books mention the phenomenon of tongues, excluding the longer ending of Mark. But in the Old Testament three different authors anticipate the New Testament phenomenon of tongues. Taken together, four different aspects of tongues surface from these old and new covenant Scriptures which point to the same conclusion: the tongues now being manifested in the church are something other than the tongues anticipated in the Old Testament prophecy and realised in the New Testament experience. These four elements are as follows:

1. New Testament tongues were revelational;
2. New Testament tongues were foreign languages;
3. New Testament tongues were for public consumption;
4. New Testament tongues were a sign indicating a radical change in the direction of redemptive history.

Let us consider each of these aspects of biblical tongues as they may contribute to an understanding of the modern phenomenon.

## 1. NEW TESTAMENT TONGUES WERE REVELATIONAL

If exegetical considerations lead to the conclusion that New Testament tongues were revelational, it follows that unless a person is willing to allow for continuing revelation beyond the Scriptures, the tongues being manifested today cannot be regarded as the same as the tongues of the New Testament. Several considerations point to this conclusion, the first of these being the usage of the term ‘mystery’ in 1 Corinthians 14 and the rest of the New Testament.

In 1 Corinthians 14:2 Paul says, ‘He who speaks in a tongue utters mysteries.’ This term ‘*mysterion*’ in the New Testament has a very specific meaning which inherently includes the idea of the communication of divine revelation.

As already noted, a ‘mystery’ in the New Testament is a truth about God’s way of redemption that once was concealed *but now has been revealed*. In its very essence a New Testament ‘mystery’ is a revelational phenomenon. This conclusion is supported by virtually every usage of the term ‘mystery’ in the New Testament.



The term 'mystery' occurs approximately 28 times in the New Testament. The consistency of meaning maintained in Scripture is striking:

Matthew 13:11: Jesus says, 'To you it is given *to know* the mysteries of the kingdom.' These 'mysteries' are no longer hidden from Jesus' disciples. Kingdom mysteries are truths *revealed* rather than concealed.

Romans 11:25: Paul explains, 'I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery.' The 'mystery' about Israel should no longer be a matter of ignorance, for the truth of the 'mystery' has been revealed.

Romans 16:25: Paul's preaching is 'according to the *revelation of the mystery* hidden for long ages past *but now revealed and made known.*' Paul can preach with confidence because the 'mystery' of the gospel now has been revealed.

As he begins his letter to the Corinthians, Paul explains: 'I proclaimed to you the mystery of God' (1 Cor. 2:1). It was not an enigma that he proclaimed. He declared openly something that needed to be understood. Paul continues in the same vein by noting that Christian ministers speak God's wisdom-in-mystery which *has been* hidden, but now can be openly proclaimed (1 Cor. 2:7). So men ought to regard Christian ministers as *stewards* of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:7). Since they are stewards dispensing the mysteries, the 'mysteries' are now understood.

1 Corinthians 13:2: Paul proposes the hypothetical case in which he might come to '*know* all mysteries', and in 1 Corinthians 15:51 he declares, 'Behold I *tell* you a mystery' Throughout his letter to the Corinthians, a 'mystery' appears as an element of God's redemptive truth that now has become known.

This understanding of 'mystery' continues throughout Paul's writings. In Ephesians 1:9, 'God *made known* the mystery of his will.' It was 'by revelation' that the 'mystery' was made known to Paul (Eph. 3:3). He wants the Ephesians to '*know*' his understanding of the 'mystery of Christ' (Eph. 3:4). He intends to make plain to everybody what is the 'administration of the mystery which has been kept hidden through all ages' (Eph. 3:9). Marriage in Christ is a 'great mystery', but now he is making it known to them. The Ephesians must pray that he will 'fearlessly *make known* the mystery of the gospel' (Eph. 6:19,20).

Throughout Colossians, the same significance prevails for the term. In Colossians 1:25 Paul declares: 'I present to you the Word of God in fullness, the mystery kept hidden for ages and generations *but now revealed* to the saints.' He can make known the gospel only because God has 'chosen to *make known* the glorious riches of this mystery' (Col. 1:27). Paul has striven that they may *know* the mystery of God (Col. 2:2). To this end he asks them to 'pray that we may *proclaim* the mystery of Christ' (Col. 4:3)

2 Thessalonians 2:7 is something of an exception to this pattern. It refers to the 'mystery' of lawlessness that has not yet been solved. But in 1 Timothy 3:9 Paul explains that deacons 'must *possess* the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience'. In 1 Timothy 3:16 Paul acknowledges that the 'mystery' of godliness is great. But then he proceeds to explain this mystery as consisting in the truth now made known that 'God was *manifest* in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, *seen* of angels, *preached* to the nations, *believed* on in the world, received up into glory'. His point is that the mystery once hidden has now been made known.

Finally, in the book of Revelation the 'mystery of the seven stars' is explained. The seven stars are the seven churches (Rev. 1:20). John subsequently reveals that 'the mystery of God' will be accomplished '*just as he announced* to his prophets' (Rev. 10:7). In similar fashion, Babylon is the 'mystery' that the interpreting angel will 'explain' (Rev. 17:5-7).

Twenty-eight times the term 'mystery' is used in the New Testament. If we set aside for a moment the occurrence in 1 Corinthians 14 presently under consideration, twenty-seven cases explicitly talk about a 'mystery' as something once hidden *but now revealed*. Christianity emphatically is not a mystery religion. Christianity stands in drastic contrast with numerous other religions built on codes of secrecy. Christianity desires everything to be open and above board. The God of Christianity has nothing to hide. He openly manifests his truth to the world in the same way in which he sends light to dispel the darkness.



In this broader context, the reference to a 'mystery' in 1 Corinthians 14:2 may be properly understood. 'He who speaks in a tongue . . . utters mysteries,' says Paul. He does not conceal truth by speaking a 'mystery'. Instead he communicates the truth that has been made known to him by divine revelation. Tongues were a divine instrument for communicating revelation. They were a means by which God disclosed redemptive truth once hidden but now revealed. This interpretation of the term 'mystery' in 1 Corinthians 14:2 would seem to be contradicted at first sight by the remainder of the verse. For Paul says, 'Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; indeed *no one understands him*, for he speaks mysteries' (1 Cor. 14:2). How could it make good sense that a message spoken in tongues is revelational if it is not understood?

It could make good sense if the 'tongues' described throughout Scripture are foreign languages. If 'tongues' are 'languages' foreign to the speaker which might not be known to the audience, then it would make perfectly good sense that 'he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, since no one understands him' (1 Cor. 14:2). He speaks as an instrument of revelation, but the language of his revelation is not understood apart from translation. In this regard, the situation at Corinth may be contrasted with the unique circumstance in Jerusalem on the first day of tongues-speaking. On the day of Pentecost, all the various languages of the world were represented by hearers as well as by speakers. So they all heard in their own native tongue the wondrous works of God. But in Corinth it is not likely that all the languages would be represented. As a result, no one would understand the speaker even though he declared the truth of God that was coming to him by revelation. A 'mystery' was being revealed in the utterance of the tongues-speaker, but since no one was familiar with the language he spoke, his revelation was not understood.

In any case, the use of the term 'mystery' as it relates to 'tongues' clearly indicates that tongues were revelational in nature. By the gift of tongues a 'mystery' concerning God's way of redemption was 'revealed' to the new covenant people of God. The revelational character of tongues is further confirmed by Paul's additional words of explanation:

He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues; but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets. (1 Cor. 14:4-5, NIV)

According to the last phrase in the above quotation, tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy. The message brought in a tongue is brought up to the level of divinely inspired prophecy, once the tongue has been interpreted. If prophecy is a revelational gift (as biblical evidence of both the Old Testament and the New Testament would appear to support), and tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy, then tongues also should be understood as a revelational gift.

To understand more fully Paul's point about the relation of tongues and prophecy in the life of the church, the question must be asked: how do words edify? Exactly what was it in the verbal gift of prophecy that 'edified'? Was it the sensations created by the voice of the prophet that edified? Was it the physical vibrations set up in the ears of the hearers that edified? Or was it the emotion experienced by the prophet himself that somehow had the effect of edifying his hearers?

No, it was not the aural sensations in themselves that built up the believers in their most holy faith. It was *the understanding* of God's truth brought about by a revelation through prophecy that edified. By the communication of truth which could be understood and believed the hearers were built up in their faith.

In a similar manner, tongues that were interpreted so that people could understand the revelation became equivalent to prophecy as an instrument of edification. Without interpretation, the observing of someone speaking in a tongue had no edifying effect on the spectator. But once the message spoken in the tongue was interpreted to the audience, edification could occur among them as it had occurred to the speaker. For tongues interpreted were equivalent to prophecy in their ability to edify. Once interpreted, the message spoken in a 'tongue' became the very voice of God to the people.

But a further question must be asked. How is it that tongues had the effect of edifying the *speaker*? Paul plainly states, 'He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself' (1 Cor. 14:4). But what in the act of speaking in a tongue caused it to edify? Was it the physical vibration associated with the phenomenon of tongues-speaking that edified the speaker?

Was it the emotion accompanying the experience? Tongues, like prophecy, are a verbal gift; and verbal gifts edify by communicating understanding. Edification through the exercise of a verbal gift does not occur by the physical vibration of the oral chambers. It does not occur through the non-rational stirrings of the emotions. Edification through a verbal gift occurs instead by the speaker's coming to understand and believe the truth that he speaks. Otherwise there is no edification.

Anyone who teaches or preaches the Word of God understands this rudimentary principle about spiritual edification. The preacher knows full well that he is not edified by the mere exercise of his gift for preaching. He must understand and believe what he says if edification for himself is to occur.

If this were not the case, a totally different concept of the way edification occurs would have to be envisaged. For if the Spirit can use merely the exercise of a verbal gift for the speaker's edification apart from his understanding what he says, then the same effect could be experienced by the hearers as well as by the speaker. If the one who spoke in a tongue could be edified even while not understanding what he was saying, could not the congregation expect to be edified in the same way? If the sensations associated with uttering a sound like 'quesrylespoyou' have the capacity for edifying the speaker, why could not those same sensations vibrating in the ears of the hearer have the effect of edifying?

But an audience is not edified one whit, no matter how zealous the speaker may be, if the message is unintelligible. Paul makes this very point. No one is edified when no one understands (1 Cor. 14:2). Edification through a verbal gift is linked intrinsically to understanding the utterance.

In accordance with this principle, it must be concluded that tongues edified as they communicated the truth of God first to the speaker and then to the hearer. Apart from understanding, there was no edification. It was the revelational experience of the truth of God directly to the tongues-speaker that caused him to be edified. The experience of the tongues-speaker was a revelational experience in which God brought to him knowledge that had the effect of edifying him.

At this point it is essential to look closely at 1 Corinthians 14:14. For Paul appears to contradict this principle when he says: 'For if I pray in a tongue my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.' This statement may seem to indicate that the one who prays in a tongue fails to understand what he is saying. It might appear that Paul is asserting that his non-rational 'spirit' expresses itself quite effectively as he speaks to God in a tongue. But his 'mind' is 'unfruitful', which seems to indicate that he fails to understand the words he himself has uttered in the tongue.

However, this on-the-surface understanding of the phrase rests on a false dichotomy between the human 'spirit' and the 'mind' as these concepts appear in the New Testament Scriptures. The human 'spirit' (*pneuma*) and the 'mind' (*nous*) cannot be separated so radically from one another. An example of the closeness of their interworking may be illustrated from an incident in the life of Christ. Some of his opponents began to 'think within themselves' that he was blaspheming (Mark 2:6). But Jesus 'knew in his spirit' what they were thinking. The word for 'knew' derives from the root for 'mind' (*nous*) as it is found in 1 Corinthians 14:14, while the word for 'spirit' (*pneuma*) is the second word found in the same verse in 1 Corinthians. According to the Gospel, Jesus possessed 'rational knowledge' in his 'spirit', which clearly indicates that the 'spirit' does not contain simply the emotional side of man. 'Mind' and 'spirit' in man communicate with one another. It is a false dichotomy contrary to the scriptural teaching about man that suggests that man's 'spirit' (*pneuma*) is an irrational, purely emotional aspect of man, while his 'mind' (*nous*) refers to his reasoning capacities.

When Paul says, 'My spirit prays' (1 Cor. 14:14), he means that from within his soul he offers prayers to God. But this praying 'in his spirit' is not without full rational understanding. As a consequence of this understanding as he prays, he is edified. But at the same time, his 'mind', that instrument by which he would formulate his thoughts for the purpose of communicating them to others, remains 'unfruitful'. It bears no fruit. No one else in the assembly is edified with him, because no one else understands what he has spoken in the tongue. He is edified well enough. But

no others are edified because his thoughts are not being communicated to them in a way that they can understand. No one else can join in his prayer because no one else understands the utterance of his 'tongue'. But if the inspired utterance of his spirit is translated into a language known by the people, then they too can be edified along with the speaker.

This understanding of verse 14 finds strong confirmation in the immediately following verses. Paul says to the possessor of the gift of tongues:

If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. (*1 Cor. 14:16-17, NIV*)

If it is to be presumed that a *speaker* can give thanks 'well enough' without even understanding what he is saying, could not the *hearer* just as well join in to give thanks in his heart without ever understanding what the speaker might be saying?

It would be far more consistent with the true mode of edification through a verbal gift to conclude that the one speaking in the tongue understood what he was saying since he gave thanks adequately. But the hearer could not join him because he did not understand.

It has been supposed that Paul intends to describe a verbal gift which edifies the speaker despite his lack of understanding, but which cannot also edify the hearer. But the evidence points in another direction. The speaker gives thanks well enough because he understands his divinely inspired utterance, even though it comes to him in a language he has never studied. But the utterance 'bears no fruit' of sanctification among the audience because it is not understood by them.

This perspective on verse 14 may be supported by a further consideration of verse 5. Paul says, 'He who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in a tongue, *unless he interprets*' (*1 Cor. 14:5*). The point is strongly made. Interpreted tongues are equivalent to prophecy. But what was God's intent in prophecy? Why did he institute this form of communication?

God's intent in prophecy was to communicate his verbally-inspired, infallible and inerrant Word to his people. God would not settle for less, because he wanted his people to have a secure deposit of truth. In the same way, God's original intent in inspiring a person to speak his word in a 'tongue' was to give expression to his verbally-inspired infallible and inerrant Word. Tongues interpreted could be equivalent to inspired prophecy only because tongues themselves were a revelational gift. By speaking in tongues a person was delivering the very Word of God, infallible and inerrant in all its parts.

This original intent for tongues could be maintained only if the gift of interpretation also functioned as a gift equivalent in its inspiration to the gifts of tongues and prophecy. Only a translation made under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit could retain the verbally inspired, infallible and inerrant character of the Word of God. Anyone who has attempted a translation of the Bible from Greek to English would understand the necessity of an inspired gift if the preciseness and authority of the original Word from God was to be maintained absolutely perfectly. It is clear from 1 Corinthians 14:28 that the tongues-speaker did not necessarily have the gift of interpretation — a gift that required an exactness which went beyond the understanding of the sense of the revelation possessed by the tongues-speaker.

No claim could be made by any translator of Scripture that his product was identical with the verbally-inspired, infallible and inerrant Word of God as originally given unless he could affirm unequivocally that God himself had been directly and infallibly inspiring the change from one language to another. In any case, Paul indicates in these verses that tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy. If prophecy is revelational and tongues interpreted are equivalent to prophecy, then tongues also must be a form of revelation that God used for his church.

For this reason, the tongues being experienced today cannot be regarded as the same as New Testament tongues, apart from opening the door to continuing revelation beyond the Scriptures. The effect of this conclusion would be quite far-reaching, and would include bringing into question the completeness of God's revelation through the apostles and prophets appointed by him to provide a foundation for the church that would remain undisturbed throughout the present age.

## 2. TONGUES WERE FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Acts 2:6 makes the point very clearly: 'Each one heard them speaking in his own language.' The testimony throughout the rest of the book of Acts gives no indicator that a different kind of tongue was manifested in the experiences of the church after Pentecost. On the contrary, the evidence supports a continuation of the same kind of 'tongues-speaking' as occurred on the day of Pentecost. In Acts 10, Peter justifies the baptism of the Gentiles who had spoken in tongues, for 'the Spirit came on them *just as it did on us*' (Acts 10:47). In reporting his action to the church at Jerusalem, Peter calls special attention to the same point: 'The Holy Spirit came on them *just as it did on us at the beginning*' (Acts 11: 15). The experience of the Holy Spirit at Caesarea corresponded to the Spirit's baptism that came on the apostles on the day of Pentecost. If the gift of speaking in tongues in Acts 2 involved speaking in a foreign language never studied, then the same explanation would apply to the experience of tongues as manifested among the Gentiles in Caesarea. In this light, it may be assumed that the same explanation would apply to the gift of tongues manifested in Ephesus (Acts 19:7). It may be worth noting that the experience of tongues in Ephesus occurred after Paul's visit to Corinth (cf. Acts 18:1-19). While no specific description characterises the tongues-speaking in Ephesus, the use of the identical language used to describe the phenomenon in Ephesus as had been used in previous narratives in Acts strongly suggests that the nature of the 'tongues' in Ephesus corresponded to the 'tongues' mentioned by Luke throughout the book of Acts.

No mention is made of a tongues-speaking occurrence at Corinth in the book of Acts (cf. Acts 18:1-18). But according to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the phenomenon of tongues obviously had a prominent role in their church life.

What was the nature of this phenomenon at Corinth? It would seem rather strange indeed if before and after Corinth as described in Acts one kind of 'tongue' manifested itself while at Corinth a totally different phenomenon appeared — and that without any elaboration in Acts of a supposed difference. In both Acts and 1 Corinthians the same terminology is used. Acts 2:4 speaks of 'other tongues', and 1 Corinthians 14:21 similarly refers to 'other tongues'. The Greek is almost identical in both places, and may be translated 'other languages' in each case. Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 14 employs an Old Testament quotation clearly speaking about foreign languages to explain the phenomenon in Corinth (1 Cor. 14:2 1, cf. Isa. 28:11,12, Deut. 28:49). As a result, it may be concluded that either Paul is making an application of an Old Testament passage that does not strictly apply, or that the tongues of 1 Corinthians 14 were foreign languages as anticipated in the Old Testament passage cited by Paul. Still further, the tongues of 1 Corinthians 14 were translatable, which would suggest that they were foreign languages. Even if it were concluded that these 'languages' of 1 Corinthians were the 'tongues of angels', they still were languages that were translatable into human equivalents.

Strong cumulative evidence supports the conclusion that the tongues of the New Testament times, both in Acts and in 1 Corinthians, were foreign languages. The effect of this conclusion is to place a large portion of modern tongues-speaking activity outside the realm of valid New Testament experience from the outset. Whatever may be going on today, it is not the kind of worship-experience described by the Scriptures of the New Testament.

In this regard, one view that has been promoted widely in recent days must be rejected, not for its initial points but for its rather unexpected conclusion. This particular viewpoint begins by affirming that the tongues described in the New Testament were for public usage in the church. It *is* furthermore asserted that the tongues of today must be regarded as something other than the phenomenon of tongues described in the New Testament Scriptures.

But in the end it is proposed that the tongues of today, though not of the nature of New Testament tongues, are nonetheless a gift of the Spirit to the modern church. Though admittedly not the same as the tongues of the New Testament, it is said that they have a proper role in the life of God's people today. Because of the frantic pace of modern life, God's Spirit has devised this means by which the modern-day, stressed-out Christian may find

emotional and psychological relief. Through 'speaking in tongues', an answer may be found to the tensions associated with living in today's world.

Obviously this conclusion cannot arise from an exegesis of Scripture, since the position affirms that the tongues of the New Testament are not the same as modern-day 'tongues'. Instead, it is being proposed that the public assemblies of God's people be opened to a most spectacular phenomenon on the basis of psychological observations concerning the possible effects of tongues-speaking. Modern-day tongues are presented as a legitimate element in worship today on the basis of a hypothesis about the way God might decide to meet the special emotional stresses of the modern world.

But is it to be supposed that the apostle Paul had no need for emotional relief from the tensions associated with his 'care of all the churches' (2 Cor. 11:28)? Should it be concluded that Martin Luther had no need of the 'psychological relief' that comes from the supposedly modern gift of tongues? With kings and governors constantly seeking his life, did Luther have a less stressful situation than Christians in the world today?

Many activities can function as psychological reliefs. Going out to eat, watching a video, or playing a game of golf can serve to uplift the spirit. Yet none of these things should be viewed as a 'gift' of the Spirit. Spiritual gifts are special administrations of the Holy Spirit by which members of Christ's body nourish and minister to one another. To suggest that the modern tongues phenomenon is not of the same nature as the tongues of the New Testament and yet is a gift of the Spirit for the church today could open the door to almost any kind of experience-centred phenomenon.

It would appear much more consistent with the biblical evidence to acknowledge that because the tongues of the first century were foreign languages, the tongues of today, which do not appear to be foreign languages, must be regarded as a phenomenon not endorsed by the New Testament Scriptures.

### 3. NEW TESTAMENT TONGUES WERE FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION, NOT PRIVATE USE

All gifts of the Spirit were for the benefit of Christ's church. A 'gift' in the New Testament was bestowed on an individual so that he might provide a blessing for the people of God. By a 'gift' of the Spirit, one person is enabled to minister to others. Rudimentary to the whole concept of gifts is the fact that they are not for private consumption, but are given for the sake of edifying the body of Christ. Paul says:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Cor. 12:4-7, NIV)

It is with this understanding in mind that Paul proceeds to develop the image of the church as a body. Each part of the body is given a ministry by which it may aid the rest of the body. The eye keeps the body from stumbling. The mouth feeds the body its nourishment. The ear hears for the rest of the body. All the various gifts enable the members of Christ's body to minister to one another.

With this larger picture of the public nature of spiritual gifts in mind, consider more closely 1 Corinthians 14:18-19. Paul says:

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Now, at first glance it seems that Paul intends to contrast private tongues with public tongues. Is not Paul saying, 'I thank God that [*privately*] I speak in tongues more than all of you, but [*publicly*] in the church I would rather speak intelligible words that instruct others?' The contrast between private words spoken in a tongue and public words spoken in prophecy seems to be underscored by his usage of the phrase 'in the church' only in conjunction with the 'intelligible words' of prophecy.

But the interpreter must be very careful about introducing words or concepts that do not appear in the original text of Scripture. As a matter of fact, the word order of verse 18 in the original language makes quite plain the true contrast intended by Paul in these verses. It is not a contrast between private and public utterances. Instead, Paul is



contrasting his experience in speaking in tongues, in the advancement of Christ's kingdom in general, with the practice of those who were so eager to promote tongues in the church at Corinth. 'More than all of you,' he says, 'I speak in tongues.' Paul's emphasis is made plain by the order of his words. 'In relation to *all of you*, I speak more in tongues' (verse 18). The comparison is between Paul and those of the Corinthian church who are so interested in promoting tongues-speaking. Perhaps to their surprise, Paul affirms that he speaks in tongues more than the whole lot of them.

Then in the next verse he introduces his contrast. 'But with reference to *the church* I prefer to speak five words for understanding' (verse 19). This, then, is Paul's contrast. It is not a contrast between private tongues and prophecy spoken in the church. Instead, the contrast is between tongues as they relate to those who are promoting tongues among the Corinthians and tongues as they relate to the church as a whole. Paul says, 'In relating to you, my record is plain. Recognise this fact. Don't talk to me about speaking in tongues as though I know nothing about the matter, for I have spoken in tongues more than all of you. I know first-hand about speaking in tongues. *But* with reference to the *church*, I would prefer to speak clearly in a language that will edify. Although I do as a matter of fact speak in tongues more than all of you, my concern is for edification.'

That is the contrast in verses 18 and 19. No mention is made of private tongues in contrast with public tongues. For New Testament tongues were never meant for private consumption. Like all other gifts of the Spirit, they were intended for the whole body. With this perspective in view, it becomes clear at the Outset that a vast majority of tongues-speaking activity today could not be the same as New Testament tongues. Private tongues are not New Testament tongues. If tongues are a gift for the church, they should be brought out into the open for the benefit of the church.

Endorsement of the idea of a 'private' gift of tongues may lead to a peculiar situation. Suppose a man affirms his sense of call to the ministry. The church responds by indicating its desire to test his gifts. He affirms that in his judgment he has the gift of preaching, so the church tests that gift. He says that he senses in himself the gift of administration. So the church tests that gift.

But what if this candidate for the gospel ministry declares that he also has the gift of tongues? Shall the church also test that gift? Or shall it be concluded that tongues are a 'private' gift that cannot be tested? Strange indeed would be such a circumstance. A person concludes that he possesses a gift meant for the body, and yet his gift cannot be tested. Every other gift of the Spirit must be tested publicly by the church. But a category of gifts is being introduced that cannot be subjected to the testing of the brothers. This kind of circumstance in the church would be strange indeed.

Yet one other verse must be analysed carefully with respect to the possibility of 'private' gifts in the church. For 1 Corinthians 14:28 states that if no 'interpreter' is present to provide the meaning of an utterance spoken in a tongue, then the speaker must keep silent in the church, and must 'speak to himself and to God'. Does not this statement appear to endorse a private gift which does not function publicly in the church?

If approached in a certain way, this verse admittedly would appear to endorse the privatisation of the gift of tongues-speaking. If no interpreter is present, the tongues-speaker should 'speak to himself and to God'.

But further consideration would not appear to lend support to this position. For the whole point of the passage is to provide orderly control of multiple gifts as they function in the church. 'Two or at the most three' should speak in tongues, and someone must interpret (verse 27). In a similar way, 'two or three prophets' should speak, and the others should discriminate (verse 29). The whole context deals with the orderly functioning of gifts within the assembly. In the context of this precise discussion, Paul makes the point that the tongues-speaker without an interpreter is to remain silent, speaking to himself and to God (verse 28). The two actions are simultaneous. As he restrains himself until an interpreter is present, he speaks within himself while communing with God.

The question is not whether the gift of tongues should function in private or in public. Instead, the question is when the gift of tongues may function in the assembly, and the answer is that tongues may function properly in the church only when an interpreter is present. From the comment in verse 31 that 'all can prophesy' in due time, it may be assumed that the same principle would hold for tongues. As soon as an interpreter is present, the utterance may be

delivered. But in the meantime, the tongues-speaker must manifest patience in the assembly, just like the prophet. For the spirits of all prophets are subject to the orderly control of prophets.

In any case, the context presumes the public functioning of the gifts. The verbal gifts of tongues and prophecy are intended for the whole community, not merely for an individual to exercise in private. A person may justify the private exercise of ‘tongues’ from personal experience. He may testify to the fact that he derives great relief from tension through letting his vocalisations in prayer run ahead of his rational processes. His ‘prayer-language’ is to him a ‘gift’ from God that helps him cope with life today.

But in the end, experience must be judged by Scripture, and not vice versa. It may be that the groanings of prayer sometimes express such deep emotions that they are not easily framed into rational expressions. But these kinds of experiences should not be identified with the tongues of the New Testament unless a convincing exegetical argument can establish that point.

#### 4. NEW TESTAMENT TONGUES WERE A SIGN

Tongues served as a signal from God concerning the fulfilment of particular prophecies about a dramatic change in the direction of God’s procedure for working in the world. God does not often surprise his people with something totally unexpected. He prepares them so that they can understand what he is doing. This rudimentary principle about the way of God’s working in the world applies to the manifestation of the gift of tongues in New Testament times. Prophecy and fulfilment, preparation and realisation work together for the edification and enlightenment of God’s people.

An elder in a church outside Chicago, Illinois does stunt flying for a hobby. Taking a ride with a stunt pilot can be great fun, provided you are properly prepared.

‘Want to take a little spin?’

‘Sure, let’s go up! Just don’t surprise me with any unexpected manoeuvres.’

‘Okay, let’s start with a little loop. But be prepared. You will experience a certain “G” factor — a “gravity” pull. Your skin will feel as though it’s about to pull right through the skeletal outline of your face. That’s the “gravity” factor.’

Next he announces the ‘hammerhead’. In this manoeuvre, the nose of the aeroplane points straight upward. The plane climbs heavenward until gravity overcomes the pulling power of the engine. When the motor begins to die, the plane falls sideways. You hope the engine will catch again as you plummet downward. That is stunt flying. Once you have been properly prepared for the various manoeuvres, you should have no problem.

In a much more reasonable fashion, God prepares his people for what is coming in the realm of redemption. He does not startle his people with surprises. God did not suddenly introduce the phenomenon of tongues as something wholly new on the day of Pentecost. Old Testament prophecies set the stage for the tongues that were to come.

We have already noted Peter’s reference to the prophecy of Joel on the day of Pentecost (*Acts 2:16-21*). When the twelve apostles began to speak in languages they had never studied, Peter indicated that they were fulfilling Joel’s prophecy. Joel had prepared God’s people for that moment by stating that in the last days God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. He prophesied that sons and daughters would *speak in tongues*.

Is that what Joel said?

No, that is not what Joel said.

What did Joel say? He said that sons and daughters would prophesy. Yet Pentecost is clearly characterised as the great day of tongues-speaking.

Has Peter perverted Scripture? Has he twisted Joel’s prophecy to make it say what he wanted to hear?

No, he has not. But his application of Joel's prophecy to 'tongues' points to a basic understanding about the nature of tongues. Tongues must be regarded as a subset of prophecy. So Joel's prediction about prophecy in the last days gave some preparation for the phenomenon of tongues. From Peter's application of Joel's words on the day of Pentecost, it becomes clear that tongues are a form of prophecy.

But even more significant for understanding the basic nature of tongues is the citation from Isaiah by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:21. His Old Testament quotation actually refers to 'other tongues'.

'Tongues' are mentioned explicitly in the Old Testament no less than three times. Three different authors in three different books of the Old Testament explicitly prophesy about tongues. In each case the Old Testament Scriptures indicate that tongues are a sign of covenantal curse for Israel.

Paul quotes one of these prophecies about tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:20-22. 'Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults' (1 Cor. 14:20). The people in Corinth were being childish about their use of the gift of tongues. They were using this gift from God as though it were a toy. They did not care whether or not others understood the meaning of the tongue.

Paul says, 'Stop being childish.' A two-year-old may squeeze food through his fist and eat his meal off his knuckles. But at some point he needs to stop being childish. In the same way, a gift of God may be used in a childish way. Paul urges the Corinthians to stop being childish in their tongues-speaking. He grounds his admonition in an Old Testament scripture that speaks about 'other tongues'. He says,

In the Law *it* is written: 'Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,' says the Lord. (1 Cor. 14:21, NIV)

By this quotation from Isaiah 28, Paul sets tongues-speaking in the context of the history of redemption. He demonstrates an accurate understanding of the context of his quotation. The prophet had asked: 'Who is [God] trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message?' (Isa. 28:9a). Then the prophet answers his own question: 'To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast' (Isa. 28:9b, NIV).

The people of God in Isaiah's day had anticipated the problem of childishness that was so obvious to Paul among the Corinthians in their use of spiritual gifts. The prophet had then depicted vividly the rudimentary way in which instruction had to be communicated from the Lord to his infantile people:

For it is:  
Line upon line, line upon line, rule on rule, rule on rule;  
a little here, a little there. (Isa. 28:10)

Because of their childishness, God must speak to his people like children. A rule here, a command there. 'Don't run in the street. Put your napkin in your lap. Go and make your bed.'

Then the prophet had pronounced God's judgment on the people for their folly: 'Very well, then, with foreign lips and with strange tongues I will speak to this people' (Isa. 28:11). If you will not hear the plain word of God in your native tongue, then God will speak to you in a foreign language. He will speak to you so that you will hear words just as an infant hears the conversation of the adult world. If you are going to act like a baby, then God will speak to you like a baby.

The baby sits in the middle of the floor with his cookie and milk. He eats his cookie and pours his milk on the floor. Mother returns to the room. She begins to talk to the baby. What does the baby hear? The baby hears what sounds like gobbledy-gook. Because the baby cannot understand the language of an adult, he hears the words of his mother as though they were babblings.

But more particularly, the baby hears words of judgment. Isaiah says that the 'tongues' of foreigners will represent the arrival of God's judgment for Israel. When the unrepentant nation hears men who have invaded their land speaking in foreign languages, they must recognise it as a sign that God has brought his judgment of an alien army on them. The army of the 'babbling Babylonians' represents for Israel a return of the judgment that first brought the confusion of tongues at the tower of 'Babel'.



But eighth-century Isaiah was not the first to speak of foreign languages as a sign of judgment for God's people. As far back as the time of Moses, foreign tongues represented the arrival of God's judgment. One of the most awesome passages in Scripture describes the curses of the covenant that would come to a disobedient Israel. Among these curses that were sure to fall on the covenant-breaker was the following:

The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose *tongue you will not understand*. (*Deut. 28:49*, NIV)

In this prophetic context dating back to the days of Moses, the significance of tongues is clear. Tongues serve as a sign that judgment has come for Israel. The threat of covenantal curses must be fulfilled because Israel will fail to hear the Word of God. This same message recurs once more a hundred and fifty years after Isaiah in the days of Jeremiah. From Moses to Isaiah to Jeremiah the significance of tongues for Old Testament prophecy is the same.

Jeremiah lived in the day of the Babylonian conquest of Palestine. The prophet anticipates the judgment that was to fall in his day:

'O House of Israel,' declares the Lord, 'I am bringing a distant nation against you — an ancient and enduring nation, a people whose tongue you do not know, whose speech you do not understand.' (*Jer. 5:15*)

Once more tongues serve as a sign of covenantal judgment on a disobedient nation. When the 'babbling Babylonians' invade Israel, speaking their strange dialect, then God's covenant people will know that judgment has come on them.

So Scripture presents a unified testimony about the significance of tongues. Prophecies from the fifteenth century B.C., from the eighth century B.C., and from the sixth century B.C. all unite to make the same point. When foreign languages overrun Israel, they will be a sign that God's judgment has come.

In the light of this larger Old Testament context of specific prophecies concerning tongues, Paul's explanation of the passage from Isaiah becomes more understandable. 'Tongues,' he says, 'are a sign' (*1 Cor. 14:22*). Tongues are a sign, and a sign is not to be regarded as an end in itself.

A sign points to something else. A sign serves as an indicator, highlighting another object worth noting. A sign may indicate a change in the direction of the road ahead. It may indicate a curve in the road which will force a turn toward a different direction. In this case, tongues function as a sign in the history of redemption indicating that God is making a change.

What is the change that God was making when he introduced tongues at the beginning of the new covenant era? God was indicating that he no longer would speak a single language to a single people. At least since the time of Moses, he had spoken one language to one people. But now, by the gift of tongues at Pentecost, God indicates that he intends to speak in many languages to many peoples. He will speak in all the languages of the world to all peoples of the world.

Tongues, therefore, mark a point of drastic change in the direction of God's work in the world. On the one hand, tongues signified a distinctive judgment for Israel. Jesus speaks of this same judgment when he says, 'The kingdom shall be taken from you and given to a people bringing forth the fruit thereof' (*Matt. 21:43*).

When the people of Israel heard the foreign tongues of the Babylonians in the streets of Jerusalem, they were experiencing the fulfilment of the prophecies of old. They had persisted too far and too long in the rejection of the words spoken so clearly by God.

In a similar way, the foreign tongues spoken on the day of Pentecost were a sign of covenantal curse for Israel. No longer would God speak exclusively to them in contrast with all the nations of the world. But at the same time, tongues at Pentecost served as a sign of the great blessing of God to all the nations of the world, including Israel. Tongues were a sign of the extension of the blessing of the covenant to all the nations of the world. For even though God took the kingdom from the Jews, he also grafted believers from among them back into the kingdom by his mercy and grace.

For this reason, tongues should be seen as a dramatic sign at a very specific point in redemptive history. They marked the transition to a truly world-wide gospel. For this reason, tongues played a significant role in the history of redemption.

But inherent in the nature of a sign is its temporally limited character. A sign marking a curve in the road is no longer needed by the traveller once the change of direction has been made. The traveller does not grasp hold of the sign so that he can take it along with him. Once the turn has been made, the sign has completed its usefulness.

Once the world might have presumed that Christianity was a Jewish religion. Christianity began with a Jewish Messiah and twelve Jewish apostles. But God gave an indicator to the world in the foundational age of the apostles that made it plain that any man from any nation who called on the name of the Lord could participate equally with Israel in the blessings of the messianic kingdom. God spoke in many languages so that everybody could hear. Gentiles as well as Jews had the opportunity to understand in their own tongue that they too were invited to participate in Christ's kingdom.

Tongues illustrated dramatically the universalistic character of Christianity. God was not limiting himself to one people. His wondrous works could be heard in all the languages of the world. Tongues were a dramatic sign of a change of direction. Christianity was not exclusively a 'Jewish' religion, despite its clearly Jewish origins.

Once the need for a sign to indicate the universal characteristic of Christianity was obvious. But who today would be in danger of thinking that Christianity was a 'Jewish' religion? The need for a sign of transition exists no longer.

By the gift of tongues God made it obvious to all that he had moved from speaking one language to the world to speaking all the languages of the world to all the peoples of the world.

Tongues are a sign, a sign that is no longer needed. Indeed, in their day they also served the purpose of being a mode of revelation. For tongues interpreted were equivalent to prophecy. They were the very words of God which, when tightly understood, could edify the church of God. But just as the church no longer needs a sign establishing its world-wide character, so neither does the church need the revelation of new divine truth that tongues might supply. No further prophetic word is needed because the fullness of the word of prophecy has been preserved in Scripture.

The church needs neither pseudo-prophetism nor pseudo-tongues. It needs no diversion from the plain declaration of the divine mystery that now is revealed in all its fullness. The one thing the church and the world needs today is the faithful proclamation of the Word of God once given. It needs no more.

This continuing need for the clear proclamation of the prophetic Word now found in Scripture is brought out by Paul as he continues his explanation of the phenomenon of tongues as predicted in the Old Testament: 'Tongues are a sign, not for believers but for *unbelievers*' (*1 Cor.* 14:22). Tongues clearly indicate God's judgment on unbelief. If the Lord would bring such devastating judgment on his old covenant people as the Babylonians brought on Israel, then he surely will bring a finalising judgment of even greater proportions on all who hear and reject the gracious message of the new covenant. This new covenant judgment was demonstrated to all when by the gift of tongues God turned from speaking one language to one people and dramatically demonstrated his intentions to speak many languages to many peoples.

But the gospel of the new covenant cannot rest with communicating a symbol of God's righteous judgment. It must move on to the clear proclamation of the message of salvation in words calculated to lead men to repentance. So Paul continues. The assembly of Christians must not rest contented with the manifestation of the gift of tongues, the sign of judgment given over the unbeliever, If the unbeliever is to be convinced that he is a sinner, the spokesmen in the assembly must move on from tongues to prophecy (*1 Cor.* 14:24). Then the secrets of his heart will be laid bare, he will fall down to worship God, and will perceive the presence of God among the people (*1 Cor.* 14:25). It is prophecy, not tongues that ultimately will make believers out of unbelievers (*1 Cor.* 14:22b).

For this reason, prophecy (in its finalised, inscripturated form) will continue its active role in the life of the church throughout the present age. Until Christ returns in glory, the 'more sure word of prophecy' found in Scripture serves the church as the divine instrument for the conviction and conversion of sinners (*2 Pet.* 1:19). It is that living and

powerful Word, the two-edged sword that pierces to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (*Heb. 4:12*).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Tongues, as in the case of all the other workings of God in the world, find their significance when located properly in the history of redemption. The barrier-breaking experience of the apostolic church at Pentecost allowed it to proclaim the gospel in all languages of the world. When seen in its unique historical setting as a sign of transition to a world-wide gospel, tongues give greatest glory to the universal gospel. While tongues served as a sign, the fuller role of inscripturated prophecy now must be allowed its permanent place of continuing priority as the church progresses from age to age, proclaiming the message of the prophetic Scriptures in the power of the Holy Spirit to men of all nations.