
WHAT ABOUT PROPHECY AND TONGUES TODAY? | *Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.*¹

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

¹ The author, a minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, was professor of biblical and systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. This article is adapted, with permission of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, 1716 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103, from one that previously appeared in *Modern Reformation*. Reprinted from *New Horizons*, January 2002.

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).