

Spirituality For the Common Good

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Notes by Glenn Peoples

This was presented as a two-part seminar at the Bible College of New Zealand in 2001. The first part was an exegetical presentation on 1 Corinthians 15:1-25, and the second part was a presentation of a "cessationist" view of the gifts of tongues and prophecy.

Introduction

1 Corinthians 14:1-25 has got the Corinthians into all sorts of trouble over the last 2000 years (more specifically in the last 100). It has become the basis of accusing them of "swinging from the chandeliers" and of being raving Charismatics (in the 20th century sense of the word).

With the somewhat controversial issues that lie ahead, textual tradition has been kind to the interpreter in that there are no significant textual variants at all from verses 1 to 25.

Context: Thematic and Cultural

The Apostle Paul is evidently dealing with a situation where certain persons or groups in Corinth are causing disunity through (un)spiritual indulgence. Elsewhere in the book, we see reference to the "weak" Christian who are being offended by the behaviour of the "strong" – probably labels that were contrived by the so-called "strong," exercising their bold liberty regardless of how it affected others (in the case of eating meat offered to idols in particular). In chapter 12 Paul has been stressing that (contrary to some in Corinth), it is *not* the case

that only an elite group of Christians are “spiritual.” Rather, he emphasised that *all* members of the body of Christ have unity because they have all been baptised “in one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). That is what makes them members of the one body, and therefore everybody in the body is equally endowed with the Spirit. Paul particularly seems to have been arguing that being endowed with spiritual gifts doesn’t require that all have the *same* gifts, and also that no person who believes they have a particular gifting should snub a fellow believer who they do not think has the same gifting, because *all* such giftings come through one and the same Spirit (12:4-11, 18-21).

The main issue of discussion from verse 1 to 25 is tongues, although some comments are made about prophecy as well. The thrust of the passage is the superiority of prophecy to tongues.

An Unavoidable Issue: The nature of these “languages”

Explicit reference to the phenomenon of “tongues” in the New Testament is restricted to Mark 16:17 (generally regarded as a later addition); Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6 and 1 Corinthians 12-14.¹ There are a couple of crucial questions related to this phenomenon. They will hopefully be answered at least in part as this passage is covered, but for now, let’s just outline what some of the questions might be.

- Are the *glossai* “real languages”?

Glossa means “tongue,” and as in English, is used metaphorically for “language.” Greek has two main words for language, *glossa* and *dialektos*. The difference between the two is effectively illustrated by Hudson F. McKenzie in *Natural Tongues*:²

¹ B.L. Smith, “Tongues in the New Testament,” *Interchange* 13 (1973), 19-23.

² Hudson F. McKenzie, *natural Tongues: Exploring Acts and Corinthians* (Hamilton: Walker, 1973), 36-37.



For examples of the way these two are used, cf. Rev 14:6 and Acts 22:2. Or even better, on the day of Pentecost the disciples spoke in foreign tongues (*glossai*), but the recipients of their preaching heard the message in their own language (*dialektos*).

Glossa has the connotation of *foreign* tongue and dialektos has the connotation of *local* or *common* tongue. E.g. I'm presenting this seminar, as far as New Zealanders are concerned, in the English *dialektos*. For Koreans, I'm using the English *glossa*. Wherever this phenomenon (speaking in *languages* in connection with the work of the Spirit) occurs, the word *glossa* is used.

- If so, are they human languages?

Fee says, with reference to the “head covering” passage in 1 Corinthians 11,

We can only guess what they were doing (probably doffing a customary head covering) and why (probably because they considered themselves already as the angels, where sexual distinctions no longer mattered - and especially so in Christian worship where all spoke in tongues,³ the language of angels, as evidence of their having attained to this degree of heavenly existence).⁴

For Fee, then, his understanding of what *glossai* means contributes to (and is contributed to by) his wider understanding of what was going on in Corinth, namely an over-realised eschatology. This framework is then used to explain difficult passages such as the one regarding women and head coverings.

Fee’s suggestion is something of a novelty (even if he is correct). At no time in this passage does Paul clearly attempt to put on the eschatological “brakes” as it were, and remind the Corinthians in response to their excess that the end has not yet come, so they are misguided for supposing that it has. Indeed, Paul doesn’t for a moment challenge the belief that we ought to be partaking in the life of the Spirit to our utmost *here and now*, his concern is *how* this is to be done. His concern is not so much that the Corinthians were trying to be too spiritual too soon, it is that their behaviour was not truly spiritual at all, but misguided.

³ One can’t help but think that a Pentecostal bias has reared its head when Fee, one of the *elite* in contemporary Pauline scholarship, is able to bring himself to say “*all* spoke in tongues.” He knows full well that this is not so, for only two chapters earlier (12:30) the apostle has pointed out that it is *not* the case that “all speak in tongues” any more than it is true that “all have gifts of healing.”

⁴ Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 145

A note on *glossolalia* before we begin

The word *glossolalia* has become a popular piece of theological jargon to refer to this phenomenon. It is a combination of *glossa* (language) and *laleo* (to speak). If we translate *glossa* in an archaic way as *tongue*, then *glossolalia* = "tongues speaking."

However, it needs to be said that while the word is a common one in contemporary charismatic theology, it is never used in the New Testament. This might not seem like a hugely significant fact at first. After all, while *glossolalia* as a noun isn't used, the noun *glossa* is used in connection with the word *laleo* often enough. In other words, while "tongues speech" isn't referred to, people are still said to "speak" in "tongues." But the reason the point is a significant one is that *glossolalia* is used as a technical term, which expresses a strong doctrinal bias. For example, if a foreigner came to us and spoke in Chinese, the Pentecostal theologian will tell us that while he has spoken (*laleo*) in another language (*glossa*), he hasn't performed *glossolalia*. Obviously what is being implied is that glossolalia is something *more* than just speaking in a *glossa*. It is used to talk about a particular interpretation of what "tongues" means in Acts and 1 Corinthians. This is seen clearly expressed by J. Morris Ashcraft:

The word *glossa* is used in the New Testament in three different senses: (1) the tongue as the physical organ of speech; (2) tongues as a definite human language and (3) tongues as *glossolalia* or ecstatic speech.⁵

Using the coined term *glossolalia* then can be very misleading, for when the interpreter *believes* that the person speaking in tongues (languages) is speaking a known human tongue – when the word *glossa* is used, she will call it speaking in other languages. When, however, the same interpreter believes that "tongues speech" in the ecstatic sense is being implied because of the appearance of *glossa*, she will call it *glossolalia*, and even though this word literally means nothing more than speaking in languages (as in the first example), it now somehow has the appearance of something more – something mysterious.

⁵ J. Morris Ashcraft, "Glossolalia in the First Epistle to the Corinthians," in Dyer, Luther B. (ed.), *Toungues* (Jefferson: Le Roi, 1971), 60.

The same is true to a degree about the use of the word “tongues” at all. When the KJV was translated, there was no problem using the term, since it was the ordinary everyday word to refer to languages. It is unfortunate that modern Bible versions have held on to the archaic term (“tongues” rather than “languages”), since it effectively creates a term with an unclear meaning, and whenever this is done, it can be said to have any number of curious meanings.⁶

For these reasons, the word *glossa* will be read here in the light of its ordinary meaning with regard to speech – namely, a language generally. If the text itself demonstrates that the language in any given context is something other than a normal human language, the possibility will be considered. If no such demonstration presents itself, then non-human languages will not be read into the passage. In taking this approach, we are not ruling out that the text may teach that the *glossai* are non-human languages, and we are not assuming it from the outset (which would obviously skew our exegesis).

1-5 **The great goal – love, and the general superiority of *understandable* prophecy over other languages (*glossa*), in achieving this goal**

How is the church to “follow after the way of love” with respect to spirituality (**pneumatika** *pneumatika* – “spiritual”)? What follows is an elaboration on how this task can be accomplished (in part), namely (as we will see), by striving to edify the whole congregation. Why is this exhortation necessary for this congregation? Obviously the principle remains true for all churches, but Paul explains why in particular it needs to be stressed here. It is necessary “because those who speak in another language do not speak to others, but to God, for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit” (v.2).

⁶ It is perhaps noteworthy that the modern rise of the charismatic practice of tongues coincides with the word “tongue” falling out of such common usage where it has a clear meaning, and into obscurity, where it can be said to have an outlandish meaning and many will be none the wiser.

Verse 2 is often construed as a helpful description, to enable us to understand the purpose of the charismatic gift of “tongues,” a God given tool for self edification. Fee claims that this verse outlines the “basic purpose” of the gift, self-edification, unlike prophecy, which is for congregational edification.⁷ According to Marion Soards,

According to Paul’s teaching, there is a clear point and a clear audience for tongues, but other humans are not the intended recipients of the message and so they do not comprehend the substance of the speech in tongues or benefit from it.

... By contrast to the tongues speakers, those who prophesy speak to humans for the edification, encouragement, and consolation of the hearers.⁸

The context of verse 2 in chapters 13-14 and the appearance of *glossai* speech elsewhere in the NT however present it quite a different light.

- Throughout chapter 14, Paul is telling the Corinthians how to use speech in other languages, and it entails building up the congregation. If Paul were really trying to tell them that this was a “private” gift intended for self-edification, it would seem that he is contradicting himself.
- If speech in other languages was intended primarily as a private “prayer language” to build oneself up spiritually, the gift of “interpretation” would be a non-necessity.
- If speech in other languages was intended as a private tool for self-edification, then it was not “a sign to unbelievers” – however, it was a sign to unbelievers (more on this later at 14:21-22).
- V. 2 is evidently a rebuke. Paul’s emphasis throughout is that we should use our gifts to build others up, but if one speaks in another language (i.e. one that others don’t understand) she can’t possibly build others up, because they don’t understand her – that’s why it is a “mystery.” Therefore, he goes on to say that she must not speak in other languages without interpretation.

⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 655-656.

⁸ Marion L. Soards, *1 Corinthians*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 281.

What follows in the passage shows that, contrary to Soards, humans *were* intended to understand tongues, and they would only fail to benefit from such speech when it was *misused*.

A note should be made of Anthony Thiselton's observation about the NRSV translation of verse 5. This version reads, "One who prophecies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up." Thiselton calls this translation "disastrously misleading."⁹ As he goes on to point out, "*The Greek does not mention any other agent than the one who speaks in tongues, who remains the subject of the verb*" [emphasis original].¹⁰ In other words, it is quite acceptable (although not *necessary* on every occasion, see 14:27-28) to see the one who *speaks* in another tongue to have the gift of interpreting it. The obvious question then is: If the one who speaks in another tongue can also interpret it, why speak in the other tongue in the first place? Why not simply give the message in an understandable tongue to begin with? There might be a number of possible answers to this and we could consume time coming up with as many answers as possible, but the one we would suggest here is that tongues functioned as a *sign* (as we will discuss when we come to 21-22). If the tongues themselves were bypassed, this sign value would be entirely lost.

Tongues as prophecy

It should be noted that other languages in this context, when interpreted, function in the same way as prophecy.¹¹ As Paul goes on to show, the only reason "prophecy" is to be preferred is that it is that the church

⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1098.

¹⁰ Ibid. Having made this undeniably true point of *grammar* showing *who* is referred to in this verse, Thiselton then goes on to express his own belief that this, in practice, would have entailed the speaker uttering unintelligible sounds and then giving articulate speech to interpret what was being expressed in tongues (perhaps rather like "interpreting" a piece of modern art?). It has been suggested in this work that the evidence of 1 Corinthians 14 militates against such a view of tongues and interpretation.

¹¹ Note Acts 2, where Peter quotes Joel's prophecy that sons and daughters would *prophesy*, and says that it was fulfilled on that day – on the occasion of speaking in other tongues.

can understand it. Apart from that, there is no difference. We'll come to this again when we get to 14:21-22, and in our last section.

6-12 Elaboration on *why* prophecy is superior

The point is that these gifts fail in their purpose unless they actually communicate something to other people for their benefit, and to neglect this purpose actually results in disunity – even alienation within the church.

Paul uses the analogy of lifeless things – the flute, the harp, and the trumpet which calls people for battle. Unless they are played clearly, nobody will know the tune. “So it is with you” (v.9). Unless the sound *you* make has meaning, nobody gains anything.

There are all kinds of languages (literally *sounds*) in the world, all having *meaning*. Unless the language you use brings an intelligible message, you may as well be talking to the air – you are like an alien, a foreigner. Fee wants to include this reference to languages *in the world* in the analogy that came before (“lifeless things”). What this would achieve is to separate “tongues” from languages in the world, and it would make “tongues” only comparable to real human languages by analogy. He does this quite admittedly on the grounds that he believes “tongues” are not languages in this sense (i.e. sounds of this world). It is a “special” language not like worldly languages.¹² But the inclusion of these verses about worldly languages with the preceding analogy concerning lifeless things is quite artificial. Having laid down the analogy (“even in the case of lifeless things”), Paul goes on to its application, explaining the practical implications (“*so it is with you, unless you speak intelligible words...*”). All sounds in this world have meaning. But when it comes to what is happening in Corinth (“so it is with *you*”), people are making utterances that do not have meaning, as all languages in the world do. If the hearer doesn’t understand the meaning, the speaker is like a foreigner, alienating and creating division rather than edifying and creating unity. After referring to languages of this world Paul doesn’t go on to

¹² Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 660, 664-665.

explain how this supposed “analogy” applies in the church when he says “so it is with you,” he just flatly says “so it is with you,” not in an analogical way, but in a straight-forward way.

Verse 12 is another summary statement – since you’re so keen to be spiritual, strive to edify the whole congregation – *that* is the spiritual thing to do.

13-17 **What happens when sensible principles governing the use of other languages are not observed**

If you do speak in another language, pray that it might be interpreted – by you, or presumably by anyone at all for that matter (as in vv. 27,28). If you do not, then while you are praying to God all right, your mind is not bearing fruit. i.e. What you’re doing is fruitless – a waste of time. Ernest Best seems to take it as self-evident that this means that what a person spays in a tongue “is spoken apart from mental processes.”¹³ But simply observing the words used here does not oblige us to accept this meaning – that just *isn’t* their intrinsic meaning. We are told that when a person speaks in another tongue and the speech is not interpreted for the congregation, the mind of the speaker is fruitful. We are told this in a context of exhortation to edify the congregation, to always consider how our actions may help or brethren. It hardly needs to be spelled out that “unfruitful” is not a synonym for “inactive” or “bypassed.” For example, a person who lives an “unfruitful” life doesn’t live *no* life at all, he lives a life that does not bear good fruit. “Fruit” in this context in 1 Cor 14 then is quite easy to read as meaning the *benefit* that the others in the congregation can receive from your prayer (not, as some might suppose, fruit in the sense of one’s *own* understanding). This is suggested by the text itself in vv. 16-17. Sure, you are in fact offering a meaningful prayer of thanks or praise (or whatever kind of prayer you might be offering), but nobody who doesn’t understand you knows that. How then can they say Amen? “You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other is not edified.” The fact that Paul can say, “you

¹³ Ernest Best, “The Interpretation of Tongues,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28:1 (1975), 47.

may be giving thanks well enough" appears to presuppose that the speaker knows (or at least *should* know) what she is saying.

Philo of Alexandria outlines four different kinds of religious ecstasy, some of which appear to be manifesting in Corinth.¹⁴

- 1.) Madness ("people will say you are mad!")
- 2.) Extreme amazement
- 3.) Passivity of mind (seen in Paul's corrective: "but I will pray with my mind also")
- 4.) Divine possession

Verse 15 gives us a strong clue as to something that was going on in the Corinthian church. Earlier in 1 Corinthians (7:1-2), Paul wrote, regarding marriage: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. *But*, since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband." It is widely recognised that Paul is using a Corinthian slogan, and immediately replying to it with a corrective slogan of his own. In Corinth, it seems, there was such an emphasis on religious ecstasy as evidence of being spiritual that states of ecstasy were equated with spirituality. To pray in this unintelligible, mindless way is being equated with "praying in the Spirit," as a kind of boast to deeper spirituality. Perhaps it served as a kind of status badge in church gatherings, where those who "spoke in tongues" in this unintelligible way looked down on those "unspiritual" ones. Perhaps those who didn't do likewise were even seen as stifling the Holy Spirit in the service. Paul's response to the boast of "I will pray with the spirit" is the further qualification, "but I will pray with the mind also" i.e. not with the spirit *alone* as though the mind is excluded from spiritual prayer.

¹⁴ Birger Albert Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Pshychokos Terminology: A Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and its Relation to Gnosticism*, SBL Dissertation Series 12 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1973), 45.

Pagan and Corinthian Practice	Paul's correction
Not intelligible	An intelligible message, although in need of interpretation if everyone is to benefit (14:7-13)
"Spiritual," without the interference of the mind, ecstatic	Not with the spirit <i>at the expense</i> of the mind, but rather with the mind <i>also</i> (14:15) I.e. not ecstatic (in the sense of <i>not</i> employing the mind) but rational
An expression of one's own spirituality, nobody else is benefited	A sign for unbelievers, and intended to edify the church (14:12, 22)

Observing the correctives given by Paul, and after examining the historical data concerning Hellenistic religion,

H. Wayne House concludes:

Corinth was experience-oriented and self-oriented. Mystery religions and other pagan cults were in great abundance, from which cults many of the members at the Corinthian church received their initial religious instruction. After being converted they had failed to free themselves from pagan attitudes and they confused the true work of the Spirit of God with the former pneumatic and ecstatic experiences of the pagan religions...¹⁵

18-19 Paul, who is most able in other languages, as an example to the church in Corinth, does not flaunt this ability, but strives to serve the congregation

¹⁵ H. Wayne House, "Tongues and the Mystery Religions of Corinth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140:558 (1983), 147.

Cf. Phil 3:1-7 where Paul claims all that he can with regard to a Jewish heritage, not to boast, but to show that they aren't the all important factors in Christ. Paul claims this ability of tongues-speaking for himself not to boast, but to show that it really isn't the be-all-and-end-all of spirituality as they seem to think.

Note the reference to "ten thousand words in a [foreign] language" in verse 19. The Greek term *mirious* is perhaps better not translated "ten thousand." As Fee notes, while it may literally mean (as a derivative of *mirioi*) "ten thousand," it is the largest word for numbers in the Greek language.¹⁶ In fact, lexicographers Arndt and Gingrich don't even give "ten thousand" as a definition, they simply give "innumerable, countless."¹⁷ The point then, is: "no matter *how* much one says in another tongue, if others can't understand it, he has achieved less than someone who only says five words in a language that can be understood – he has achieved absolutely nothing."

20-22 Scriptural explanation of the use of other languages, and its relation to Israel

The quotation from Isaiah may seem a little obscure at first. But its usage is instructive as to the nature and purpose of the phenomenon being observed. In its context in Scripture, Isaiah 28:11 foretells the judgement upon Judah at the hands of the Babylonians, a judgement from God. Because God's people would not listen to Him, He was going to speak to them in judgement, through the lips of foreigners, those who speak words that Judah will not understand. The prophet goes on in verse 13:

Therefore, the word of the LORD will be to them,
"Precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line.
Here a little, there a little;"

¹⁶ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 675, fn. 57.

¹⁷ W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958, 2nd ed.), 529.

In order that they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.

Different translations differ as to how they translate “precept upon precept... etc.” The NRSV has the usual and terribly unhelpful footnote, “Meaning of Heb of this verse uncertain. The NIV footnote says, “possibly meaningless sounds, perhaps a mimicking of the prophet’s words.” This is probably correct, given the sound of the Hebrew here, and the context. The Hebrew is:

Tsav latsav, tsav latsav, kav lakav, kav lakav, z^e`er sham, z^e`er sham

The NIV comment is right, it *sounds* like gibberish (even for Hebrew, which sounds bad enough to some people), and is probably meant to imitate the way God is going to speak to His people through these foreigners. That is, it illustrates that Judah won’t be able to understand their speech (even though it was genuine speech in real human languages). Isaiah is actually not saying anything new. This punishment for disobedience and unbelief had already been warned of in the “covenant curses” of Deuteronomy 28:49

The LORD will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand...

The same kind of warning came for Israel, before the Assyrians attacked, in Jeremiah 5:15.

I am going to bring upon you a nation from far away, O house of Israel, says the LORD. It is an enduring nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say.

Prophecies of this nature (including the one Paul uses) speak of the punishment of Israel and/or Judah for disobedience and unbelief. The unfolding of the events described – the actual invasion of these foreigners, the men of strange tongues that Israel didn’t understand, was a sign of judgement, a sign to them of their unbelief.

Instead of communicating to them clearly in their own native tongue, God “will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue” (vs. 11). He shall bring to pass the curse of the covenant spoken by Moses. A nation whose language is not their own shall swoop down upon them to execute God’s wrath and curse. His favorable relationship to them shall be terminated by a people whose language they cannot understand. God will speak in unfamiliar

accents, "that they may go and stumble backward, be broken, snared, and taken captive" (vs. 13).¹⁸

Why then does Paul see it as appropriate to quote this judgement passage here in the New Testament era? It is particularly pertinent to note that the prophecies in Scripture forewarned of destruction upon Israel by invading armies. Consider the events of the first century – what was about to happen to Israel? (Hint – AD 70)

After talking about Israel's being caused to stumble, Isaiah goes on to talk about a time when God will lay in Zion a cornerstone (or "foundation stone"). This passage is now immediately recognisable to us. Paul referred to it in Romans 9-10 to refer to Jesus – the cornerstone, who has become a *stumbling* block to Israel. The "cornerstone" image is used by Jesus Himself in Matthew 21. Immediately after the parable of the wicked tenants – who signified Israel rejecting the son of the vineyard owner, Jesus says in vs 42-44:

Have you never read in the scriptures:

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes"?

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.

The phenomenon of Gentile tongues among the people of God is a sign of Israel's unbelief and impending judgement. The passage Paul uses to show this points to a future event of God laying a foundation stone – Christ. This stone is rejected by Israel, and once again they stumble through unbelief. Having rejected Christ and His message, the message goes out to all the nations, and their tongues are heard amongst God's people. Judgement is coming – and it came.

Paul had experienced Jewish unbelief firsthand in Corinth – Acts 18:5-6

But if tongues are a sign of "covenant curse," it can also be seen as a sign of blessing. "As God turns *from* Israel, He turns *toward* all nations" [italics mine].¹⁹

¹⁸ O. Palmer Robertson, "Tongues: Sign of Covenantal Curse and Blessing," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38:1 (1975), 44.

[On the day of Pentecost,] God's New Testament Prophets suddenly burst out spontaneously in declaring the wonderful works of God in all the languages of mankind. The sign is unmistakable. The transition has occurred. God no longer speaks singularly to a single people. He speaks in the many tongues of the many peoples of the earth. The sign of tongues is a sign of transition. A new day has dawned for the people of God.²⁰

This has at least one fairly obvious implication with regard to the nature of the languages: Real human languages.

David Hill makes the observation about prophecy being a sign for believers in this verse:

Prophecy edifies... because it serves as 'a sign for believers' (14:22). The polemical thrust of this verse suggests that the Corinthians maintained that glossolalia serves as a sign for believers, i.e. as a proof of high pneumatic status and authority.²¹

In light of what we have seen about the purpose of tongues as having been a sign to unbelievers, in particular to unbelieving Israel, Fee is probably right when he says that 22b means that prophecy is a sign for believers, an indication of "God's favour resting upon them."²² Dunn elucidates:

Prophecy is a sign, as glossolalia is a sign, in that both reveal God's attitude – the one God's attitude towards wilful unbelief (hence a sign of judgment [*sic*], the other God's attitude towards faith. Prophecy by its inspiration *and* content reveals that God is present in the midst of the assembly – even the unbeliever confesses this (vv. 24 f.).²³

While tongues are a sign that God has turned His unique favour away from one nation in particular, the presence of prophecy in a Gentile context, too, has implications with regard to God's covenant relationship with people. As Fee notes in a footnote,²⁴ the older Scriptures present the absence of prophecy in Israel as a sign of the absence of God's favour (e.g. Isaiah 29:10; Micah 3:6; Lam 2:9). If God no longer speaks to the

¹⁹ Ibid., 48.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, Marshall's Theological Library (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), 125.

²² Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 683.

²³ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*, New Testament Library (London: SCM, 1975), 231.

²⁴ Ibid.

nation of Israel through prophets, but has brought His revelation through prophets of the nations of the earth, a significant change has occurred. Coupled with the presence of tongues as a sign of Israel's unbelief and judgement, a conclusion can be drawn:

God no longer speaks specially to Israel, but as a sign of judgement upon them for their unbelief, he speaks through all the nations of the earth. This is sign to these unbelievers of God's having removed his covenant relationship from them. However, in speaking in revelation to all the nations of the earth (i.e. *prophecy*), he is showing them (i.e. a *sign*) that he has counted them as His people, His favour rests with them.²⁵ This is another reason why it was absolutely inappropriate for the Corinthians to treat tongues as a tool for personal edification, and why it is absurd to think that they ever carried the significance of a "private prayer language." They, like prophecy, are revelation for the people of God (although unlike other prophecy, they need to be interpreted). They, like prophecy in the church, are a sign of a particular stage (i.e. transition) of God's unfolding salvation history in the world.

23-25 The effect upon outsiders of proper and improper uses of languages and prophecy

Having seen the salvation-historical significance of tongues and prophecy, we can now make sense of an apparent contradiction. Having just stated that Prophecy is a sign for *believers*, Paul goes on to imagine a hypothetical scenario – an outsider comes into the church and hears people speaking in all kinds of different languages (presumably with no attempts at interpretation). He isn't able to make any sense of what is going on, and will think you're all crazy. However, if he comes in and hears you prophesying, and the secrets of his heart are made known, he will be convinced that God really is at work.

²⁵ While notions like this could be misconstrued as being anti-Semitic, they need not be. All that is being affirmed is that God treats all nations as *equal* with respect to covenant relations with Himself. Israel is not *disadvantaged*, it merely no longer has the advantages it once enjoyed.

At first it does look like Paul has just contradicted himself. He said only a couple of verses earlier that tongues were a sign to unbelievers – yet this unbeliever who enters will say you're mad! Paul also said that prophecy was a sign for believers – yet this unbeliever is the one who benefits from it!

But such a reading doesn't do justice to the "covenant background" Paul has appealed to in vv. 21-22. Prophecy is a sign to believers, *not* because they are the only ones who benefit from it, but rather it is a sign of God's covenant relationship with all the nations rather than just Israel. Likewise, tongues are a sign to unbelievers, *not* because unbelievers will understand it and be edified by it, but rather as a sign to unbelieving Israel that God is not communicating uniquely with her anymore. What Paul is doing here in vv 22-25 is not explaining the purpose and place of tongues and prophecy again, but simply illustrating that common sense dictates that tongues must be interpreted and made clear or you'll look silly! Even an unbeliever will see how ridiculous such behaviour is, while you, drunk with your sense of spiritual "otherness," will be blind to the fact. If, however, the revealed word of God is proclaimed, even an unbeliever can see how much more beneficial it is.

In Retrospect: Evaluating Fee's eschatological explanation.

Fee is probably wrong. Paul's discussion of tongues in Corinth shows that the problem is not primarily an eschatological one. It is not the case that Paul approves of what the Corinthians were doing, but that he thinks they are doing it too *much* out of a wrong belief that the end had come. Rather, he does not approve of it at all. His rebuke is not "wait for the end to really come – then let loose with these tongues." Rather, it is "use tongues in the church correctly. Interpret. Edify the body. See tongues as a sign against unbelief."

The question of continuance

Introductory comments

Pentecostal writer Gordon Fee, while he is often critical of the Pentecostal movement, makes the following observations on the gifts of 1 Corinthians chapter 12:

Apart from the traditional Pentecostal movement, the church at large showed very little interest in this paragraph until the outbreak of some of these phenomena both in Roman Catholic and in traditional Protestant circles in the late 1950s. The result has been a considerable body of literature, both scholarly and popular, on the gifts enumerated in vv. 8-10. Most of this literature assumes that such gifts are available to Christians in all ages of the church. Although some have taken a dim view of the phenomena, most have been moderately cautious, suggesting openness to what the Spirit might do, but usually offering correctives or guidelines as well. However, there has also been a spate of literature whose singular urgency has been to justify the limiting of these gifts to the first-century church. It is fair to say of this literature that its authors have found what they were looking for and have thereby continued to reject such manifestations in the church. In can also be said that such rejection is not exegetically based, but results in every case from a prior hermeneutical and theological commitment.

Perhaps the greater tragedy for the church is that it should have lost such touch with the Spirit of God in its ongoing life that it should settle for what is only ordinary and thus feel the urgency to justify itself in this way.²⁶

If we were expecting observations of scholarly integrity and Christian charity, Fee has let us down. What he has offered instead is a gratuitous and untrue string of insults that are surely beneath him. It is also a bit rich for Fee, a committed Pentecostal, to accuse those who differ with him in this regard of looking in the text for what they want to find. In fact, Fee himself has had to admit elsewhere:

²⁶ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 600. It is equally disappointing to see John Roxborough begin with a historical accuracy, then fall into the same kind of invective comments as Fee:

Until this century it was the common belief of most in the church that gifts of tongues and other spiritual gifts referred to in Acts and First Corinthians were only for the early church...

The belief that the gifts died out because God intended them to be restricted to the dispensation of the Apostolic Church *now* [i.e. since the rise of Pentecostalism] appears to be a rationalisation. A more probable explanation is that the early church found it easier to institutionalise spiritual authority so that it was confined to the official leadership. It was simply too untidy and difficult to cope with wandering prophets and people whose spiritual gifts sometimes disturbed the tranquility of congregations.

John Roxborough, *The Charismatic Movement and the Churches* (Auckland: Impetus, 1996), 13.

This is a classic case of chronological snobbery, or "as-we-now-know-ism," where it is assumed that the currently popular views are obviously correct and ancient views are archaic and outdated. It also subtly misrepresents

Pentecostals, in spite of some of their excesses, are frequently praised for recapturing for the church her joyful radiance, missionary enthusiasm, and life in the Spirit. But they are at the same time noted for bad hermeneutics... First, their attitude toward Scripture regularly has included a general disregard for scientific exegesis and carefully thought out hermeneutics.... Secondly, it is probably fair - and important - to note that in general the Pentecostals' experience has preceded their hermeneutics. *In a sense, the Pentecostal tends to exegete his experience* [emphasis added].²⁷

Having acknowledged this, it is absolutely improper for Fee to insist that those who do not share his view that all the gifts are for today "in every case" are working from a prior theological commitment, and not an earnest exegesis of Scripture. He has essentially admitted that the views of the movement that *he* is associated with are generally reached by a subjective experience rather than by exegesis. The sheer number of believers who have departed *from* Charismatic movements into more conservative circles should be sufficient to expose Fee's unkind claim that everyone who doesn't believe all the gifts are for today is simply working from a prior theological commitment.

To set the record (in part) straight, let us hear from a cessationist:

The point to be emphasized [*sic*] here is that the cessation of certain of the charismata does not mean ... that the Spirit of God is any less powerful in the church today than He was in New Testament times. The cessation of the miraculous charismata ... was part of God's programme for the church and should be viewed in terms of progress rather than loss or deprivation.²⁸

An article from Banner of Truth recalls a seminar given by cessationist professor/pastor Edward Donnelly on "spiritual gifts and the Bible":

Professor Donnelly... confessed, "I really dislike this word, 'cessationist.' It is such a wimpish, inadequate, pathetic word! It seems to say, 'Poor people. Nothing more for them.' " He told of a time when the small boys in his church were collecting footballer stickers, pestering their mothers in supermarkets to purchase a packet, not knowing what pictures would be inside, then swapping them, trying to fill completely a big album. After a long time one wee boy had collected the lot: what a relief for him. Ted did not notice the other boys looked in pity at this lad who had ceased all that frenzy of searching for an illusive sticker and saying, "He's a cessationist." Rather they viewed him with admiration because he was the fulfilled one. He had everything, while they were

cessationism, by portraying it as a view that says only church leadership retained the revelatory gifts after the Apostolic age. In fact, it claims that *nobody* did.

²⁷ Fee, "Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent: A Major Problem in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," in Spittler, Russell (ed.), *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 119-122.

²⁸ E.H. Andrews, *The Spirit Has Come* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1982).

still going on and on in their long frustrating search. Ted thought that instead of "cessationist" he would prefer to be called "completist" or a "satisfiedist" or a "have-it-allist."²⁹

In order to evaluate the claims about the continuance or cessation of the spiritual gifts, we must keep ourselves back from the kind of mud slinging that Fee and those like him might wish to engage in. What is required is a spirit of openness to what we might find if we are serious about looking for answers.

As Richard Gaffin reminds us:

Scripture as a whole teaches that in His own sovereignty the Spirit has seen fit to circumscribe his activity and to structure it according to the patterns revealed there. Those patterns, not what the Spirit may choose to do beyond them, ought to be the focus and shape the expectations of the church today.³⁰

The Witness of History

Tongues and prophecy ceased. Rather than a theological principle, this is said here as an historical observation. If Fee were right about what Paul believed, "Of course they [the gifts] will continue [i.e. from Paul's day onwards] as long as we await the final consummation,"³¹ then Paul was wrong. Discussing the occurrence of "tongues" in the church, church historian E. Glenn Hinson puts it like this: "The first sixteen centuries... were lean ones indeed... [I]f the first five centuries were lean the next were starvation years for the practice in Western Christendom and doubtful ones in Eastern Christendom."³² It is observed by many scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds (Pentecostal and otherwise), that tongues and prophecy did cease. On very few isolated occasions in the early centuries, some persons or groups made the claim to have

²⁹ Geoffrey Thomas, "Spiritual Gifts and the Bible," *Banner Articles*, http://www.banneroftruth.co.uk/articles/spiritual_gifts_and_the_bible.htm

³⁰ Richard B. Gaffin, "A Cessationist View," in Grudem, Wayne (ed.), *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996), 25.

³¹ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 893.

³² E. Glenn Hinson, Wayne E. Oates and Frank Stagg, *Glossolalia* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 45-46. Cited in Thomas R. Edgar, "The Cessation of the Sign Gifts," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:580 (1988), 373.

miraculous ability of giftings in this area, but their testimony is highly dubious.³³ In any case, as Donald Dayton notes, many advocates of the charismatic gifts today are willing to grant that certain of the gifts stopped, and that what we are seeing today is an eschatological outpouring, an event of the last days.³⁴ Certainly if the pouring out and manifesting of God's Spirit *is* an "end time" phenomenon, and if Jesus *is* about to return, then such a premillennial view of the re-appearance of the spiritual gifts has something going for it.³⁵ But it does need to be stressed that this is *not* comparable to saying that the gifts "continued" in the church, and it basically results in conceding the point that the gifts ceased with the Apostolic church. The dialogue with Pentecostals of this variety then would move on to being an eschatological one: Didn't the last days begin in the New Testament? Wasn't *that* the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit?

We move now to the arguments concerning *continuation* of the gifts from the NT time onward (or their cessation).

³³ For example, the Montanist sect of the late second century practised religious ecstasy including prophetic utterances through the lips of the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla. But this group has always been regarded as schismatic and deviant, in part due to the fact that their prophecies consisted largely of false predictions about the return of Christ and the location of the New Jerusalem, along with their extraordinary (perhaps Gnostic) asceticism and a zealous desire for martyrdom.

By way of an aside, it is interesting to see neo-pentecostal writers revising history to exalt Montanism as a "Reform movement" restoring to the church a spirituality which it has immediately lost after the Apostolic era. The reason for this revision, it appears, is to provide historical validity to a position (Pentecostalism) that so clearly lacks it without such revisions. E.g. Charles E. Hummel, *Fire in the Fireplace: Contemporary Charismatic Renewal* (London: Mowbrays, 1978), 149, or Eric Nestler, "Was Montanism a Heresy?" *Pneuma* 6:1 (1984), 67-78.

³⁴ Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 26-28.

³⁵ There isn't space to develop this line of discussion here, but it should be noted that Pentecostalism has, since its appearance in the 20th century, been almost universally associated with premillennialism and a highly futuristic view of eschatological prophecy, seeing the "last days" as a period of time just prior to Christ's return and the rapture, a time where the Spirit would be poured out in fulfilment of the prophecies of Joel.

Revelatory Gifts

We are focusing here on what we will call *revelatory* gifts: Apostleship, prophecy and tongues. The reasons for this are twofold: Firstly, they carry the most theological significance (with respect to *authority*), and secondly, they (with the exception of Apostleship) are among the most controversial. Additionally, we don't have unlimited time and space, so we have deliberately limited our scope in this way.

Apostleship

It is generally accepted (with very few exceptions) that the gift of Apostleship does not operate in the church today. There is obvious reason for this:

- In Acts 2:42, the converts to Christ “devoted themselves to the Apostles’ doctrine,” suggesting that the teaching of the Apostles carried the same kind of authority as Scripture (those Protestants among us - myself included - go further than this, noting that the Apostles' teaching became Scripture).
- In 2 Peter 3:2, the teaching of the Apostles is equated with the teaching of the “Lord and Saviour” Himself.
- In selecting a replacement for Judas, the Apostles deliberately chose a man who had been personally involved in the earthly ministry of Jesus, and who had to be able to be a witness to His resurrection (Acts 1:21-22).
- Paul is obviously aware of this kind of strict criteria when he defends his own Apostleship, and insists, “haven't I seen the risen Lord?” (1 Cor 9:1-2)

Prophecy

Wayne Grudem, a defender of the continuation of prophecy in the church today, tells his readers that there is a biblical distinction between *authoritative* prophecy and *non-authoritative* prophecy. Thus, he reasons, prophecy (non-authoritative) continues today and it is not on par with Scripture, so there is no theological problem with it functioning today.

Grudem's conclusions are based on Paul's discussion of prophecy in 1 Cor 14. Not wanting to detract from the next speaker's seminar on this passage, comments here will be brief. Grudem's first piece of evidence is 1 Cor 14:29. The NRSV reads, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh *what is said*." Thus, reasons Grudem,

Paul's statement, "Let the others evaluate" (**οἱ ἄλλοι διακρινέτωσαν**), indicates that Paul had in mind the kind of evaluation whereby each person would "weigh *what is said*" (RSV) in his own mind, accepting some of the prophecy as good and helpful, and rejecting some of it as erroneous and misleading.³⁶

While Grudem places great weight on them, it cannot go unsaid that the last three words ("what is said") are not translations from the Greek text, but rather an interpretation of what is meant. Grudem himself knows this, as he freely concedes that the Greek simply says "let the others evaluate." It is not, then, self-evident that what is being described as an evaluation of what a prophet says, sifting out the good from the bad. O. Palmer Robertson responds to Grudem's claim by pointing out how the term for "evaluate" (*diakrino*) can be used.³⁷ The basic meaning is to discriminate, and it is used to point out that God has made no *discrimination* among Jews and Gentiles, pouring out His Spirit on both (Acts 15:9). When rebuking believers in Corinth for taking each other to court, Paul says, "Isn't there anyone among you who is wise enough to *judge* a dispute between brothers?" (1 Cor 6:8). James complains that Christians have "discriminated among themselves" by showing preference to the rich over the poor (James 2:3-4). Robertson suggests that "[m]ost frequently it is used to

³⁶ Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1982), 62.

³⁷ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Final Word: A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993), 99.

make a distinction among *people*," rather than ideas or words.³⁸ Whether we would follow this idea further and insist that it *should always* be read this way is doubtful, but also irrelevant. The point is, it certainly isn't self-evident or even clear that 1 Corinthians 14:29 teaches that people must discern between the true and the false prophecies of a genuine prophet. Of the possible meanings of the verse, most are better suited to a view of prophecy which doesn't require it to be non-authoritative.

- Perhaps it means the "discriminators" (those with the *charisma* of discernment) would identify those who are genuine prophets and those who are not.
- Perhaps the "others" refers to the other *prophets*, and they are to discriminate in terms of who will speak and in what order (10 prophets with a lot to say, for example, might take up too much time).

Setting Grudem's thesis aside and taking into account the way New Testament Scripture talks about prophets (as in Ephesians 2 and 3 below), there doesn't seem to be any basis for suggesting that prophecy might be non-authoritative on any occasion. Revelations from God are just that – revelations (presumably true ones). If we claim that God is revealing something through us, but we then proclaim something that does not have the authority of God, we have been mistaken (or misleading, but we're giving the benefit of the doubt here), and in fact God has not revealed something through us.

Ephesians 2:20

Apostles and prophets, like Jesus Christ, are part of the foundation of the church. The word of the prophet carries the same kind of authority as the word of an Apostle. Like the Apostles also, the prophetic office is one that was formative and temporary, serving as a foundation that does not need to be laid again and again (just like the work of Christ, for that matter).

³⁸ Ibid., 17.

In case anyone thinks that “prophets” is a reference to the Old Testament, Ephesians 3:5 affirms that the “apostles and prophets” refer to a New Testament group of people who are now proclaiming what God has done in Christ.

Tongues

Gordon Fee surprises us when, although he explicitly condemns cessationism as being biased and uninterested in sincere exegesis, says:

The question as to whether the “speaking in tongues” in contemporary Pentecostal and charismatic communities is the *same* in kind as that in the Pauline churches is moot – and probably somewhat irrelevant. There is simply no way to know. As an *experienced* phenomenon, it is *analogous* to theirs, meaning that it is understood to be a supernatural activity of the Spirit, which function in many of the same ways, and for many of its practitioners has similar value to that described by Paul.³⁹

This admission, although Fee doesn’t seem to notice it, immediately robs Fee (and any “continuationists” who share his line of reasoning) of the ability to paint Paul as saying: “Of course [the gifts] will continue as long as we await the final consummation” (although this is exactly what Fee claims Paul says).⁴⁰ In making the above claim, Fee is now saying that the same phenomenon of Paul’s day (tongues) may or may not have continued, and that what we have is something analogous to it!

The exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14:1-25 offered earlier gives good grounds to believe that tongues have ceased. The phenomenon of tongues was a prophetic sign – God has included peoples from all nations in His people, and Israel was being judged for her unbelief. This judgement culminated in AD 70 with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. After this point, tongues are redundant. No New Testament scholar that we are aware of, whether charismatic/Pentecostal or otherwise, has ever responded to this line of argument in print.

³⁹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 890, fn. 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 893.

This argument also gives good grounds to include tongues within the category of prophecy, as does the fact that they both serve the same function in 1 Cor 14 when tongues-speech is interpreted. That being the case, any reason to think that prophecy has ceased is also applicable to tongues.

1 Corinthians 13:8-11

Non-cessationist scholars have, it would seem, made it appear that the cessationist position stands or falls on this passage, perhaps because by itself this verse doesn't make the strongest possible case for cessationism (and is therefore easier for non-cessationists to "rebut").⁴¹ This passage is treated last here for good reason. Cessationist writers are in fact *not* all in agreement that it does teach the cessation of tongues and prophecy (while obviously no cessationist thinks it teaches *continuity*).⁴² However, it is frequently appealed to in this connection.

Here, Paul singles out *prophecy, tongues* and *knowledge* (what we would call gifts of *revelation*) as being temporary in some way. The basic disagreement over this passage is on what is being referred to by "the perfect" (*to teleion*) of verse 10. A few smaller points will be touched on when we'll come to this term.

The "continuationist" interpretation of this verse is that offered by Fee, who says (as seen earlier) that Paul's view of these gifts is that "Of course they will continue as long as we await the final consummation." "When the perfect comes" is taken as being equivalent to "when Christ finally returns." But immediately some inconsistencies present themselves. Fee, like many non-cessationists, are quite willing to see tongues as an angelic heavenly language. In fact, we saw Fee earlier saying that the Corinthians were making such a great deal of these tongues *because* they mistakenly believed that the end had come already, so they had begun to

⁴¹ See for example Jon Ruthven, who makes the claim: "1 Cor. 13:8-10 is perhaps the locus classicus in the discussion on the continuation of spiritual gifts," *On the Cessation of the Charismata* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993), 31.

⁴² Richard Gaffin for example, while holding to a cessationist theology, does not consider cessationism to be taught in 1 Cor 13:8ff. See R. Fowler White, "Richard Gaffin and Wayne Grudem on 1 Cor. 13:10," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35:2 (1992), 173-181.

emulate angelic behaviour. Why then, does Fee now do a turnabout and interpret this passage to say that Paul teaches that tongues will *cease* at the return of Christ? A respectful suggestion might be that he does so to avoid the dreaded “other” interpretation – the cessationist one.

A cessationist view of this verse is typically represented by non-cessationists by means of a straw man, a weak representation of it. A fairly typical example of such a rebuttal is used by Richard Hayes:

In dispensationalist Christian groups, it is sometimes claimed that “the complete” [*to teleion*] in v. 10 refers to the completion and closure of the New Testament canon, so that the charismatic gifts were only for the apostolic age and have now ceased to function in the church. This interpretation is simply nonsense. There is nothing in the passage about “the New Testament” or about a future revocation of revelatory gifts in the church.⁴³

First he sets up cessationists as being “dispensationalists,” which is patently false. The most scholarly representations of cessationism come not from dispensationalists but from *Reformed* scholars, who, being Reformed after all, are thoroughly *anti*-dispensational. The often cited (although Apocryphal) link between dispensationalism and cessationism is almost amusing when we consider the fact that “Classical Pentecostalism is thoroughly dispensational.”⁴⁴ Insisting on the connection between the two might serve to dodge the bullet of the more respectable proponents cessationism (i.e. the Reformed writers), and to “shelve” cessationists by categorising them unfavourably, but it is misleading. Secondly, this is clearly a circular argument. Let’s say that the cessationist says that “the perfect” refers to the closing of the New Testament canon (which they generally don’t say), and that this passage therefore teaches these gifts will be revoked at this point. How is it a *rebuttal* of this claim for Hays to say “but this passage says nothing about the New Testament canon or the revocation of these gifts!” Obviously this is what he would need to show, since the cessationist would be saying that this is *precisely* what this text refers to. He can’t use this belief as proof that the belief is true.

⁴³ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997).

⁴⁴ M. James Sawyer, “Dispensationalism,” in Alister E. McGrath (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 110.

Craig Blomberg claims that “[a]lthough later interpreters [i.e. cessationists] may have thought otherwise, *nothing* in Paul supports *any consciousness* of his writing near the end of an apostolic age or the close of a biblical canon” [emphasis added].⁴⁵ But this is demonstrably and widely admitted to be false. While it seems clear enough that Paul did not have in mind the canon of the Nicean Council (and he certainly could not have expected the believers in Corinth to take his words this way), there is considerable evidence in Paul and elsewhere that the role of the Apostles in the early church was formative and temporary.

- Paul defends his apostleship as though it was something unique, something that others did not and could not have, because he had “seen the risen Lord.”
- Paul says that along with Jesus Himself, the New Testament apostles and prophets make up the *foundation* of the church (Eph 2:20) – obviously not an ongoing work.
- While we have acknowledged that Paul didn’t have a formal New Testament canon in mind, it was the apostolic and prophetic tradition that *gave rise* to the canon as the testimony of the apostolic witness (books not considered “apostolic” were not included).

So if Blomberg is resisting the cessationist view simply because he can’t see any evidence in Paul that the apostolic era was a temporary one, his case is flimsy. Such evidence is there to be seen. But Blomberg may appear more convincing when he notes Paul’s saying that we will see “face to face.” As he puts it, “[a]fter the Bible was written, Christians did not see God “face to face.”⁴⁶ Additionally, we do not *now* have absolute, “perfect” knowledge of all things. Consequently, he reasons, “the perfect” must have referred to the return of the Lord, and not to the closing of the canon or anything like that. This is probably the strongest point in the argument in favour of continuation of the gifts (concerning this passage at least).

⁴⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 260.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

This point has not gone unanswered. One significant point to note is that it isn't clear that Paul means that we will see *God* face to face in this verse (even if he believed that we *will* see God at the consummation). The comparison is between seeing oneself *dimly* in a mirror, and seeing face to face, because when we look into a mirror we do not see God – we see our own face. This comparison would make little sense if it meant “Now we see ourselves dimly as in a mirror, but then we will see God face to face.”⁴⁷ The use of this comparison suggests that what is being referred to is an improved vision of *ourselves*, in a better, clearer mirror than that which we now possess, to use Paul's analogy. Cessationist Myron Houghton comments on this saying of Paul's: “‘Face to face’ describes the clear and direct revelation of oneself which believers today possess when they look into the mirror of the Scriptures, God's completed revelation.”⁴⁸ Since “then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” comes immediately after the mirror analogy, and since it doesn't say “then I shall *know* God as well as He knows me” (most would admit this is impossible, even in heaven), this is also quite capable of being seen as a reference to improved knowledge of oneself in the light of the revelation given through the apostolic tradition.⁴⁹ Cessationist treatment of these questions may not be any more convincing than alternative treatments, but it can at least be noted that there is a case to be made that has perhaps not been given its due credit.

Whether any of these minor arguments have merit may very well stand or fall on the use of the term “the perfect” (v.10). The Greek term is *to teleion*. It is used only three times in 1 Corinthians altogether, in 2:6 and 14:20.

⁴⁷ While some translators have shown preference for “glass” (i.e. window) e.g. J.N Darby, the word is used elsewhere for mirror in the NT (James 1:23-24), and it makes very little sense to say that we see something “in a window!”

⁴⁸ Myron J. Houghton, “A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:611 (1996), 353

⁴⁹ Houghton acknowledges that this may seem fairly presumptuous. Do believers who have access to the revelation of the New Testament *really* know themselves as well as God Himself knows them? He replies:

However, the problem does not go away if these words are interpreted eschatologically. In eternity, will believers really know fully just as they have been fully known? The answer to this question seems to be, “Yes, but only in some limited qualified sense.” If that answer is acceptable for the eschatological interpretation, then it ought to be acceptable for this writer's “completed canon” view as well. (Ibid., 354)

2:6

"We do, however, speak a message wisdom among the *mature*..."

14:20

"Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be *adults*."

Elsewhere in this same epistle then, the word doesn't carry a meaning of absolute or final perfection, but rather of maturity over and against infancy or immaturity. This is stressed further in 1 Corinthians 13 when Paul says "when I was a child... when I became a man" (v. 11).⁵⁰ The implication is that tongues, prophecy, and words of revelation ("knowledge") are the marks of an immature or formative stage.⁵¹ After this stage has passed, faith, hope and love will remain, but these revelatory gifts will not.⁵² This is only confirmed elsewhere where we read that apostles and prophets are part of the *foundation* of the church, along with Christ Himself, suggesting a formative "apostolic era" in which the revealed teaching for the church is laid down, by Christ and His apostles and prophets.

⁵⁰ Fee concedes in part when he notes that "the use of the substantive, "the perfect/complete," which sometimes can mean "mature," plus the ambiguity of the first analogy (childhood and adulthood) has led some to think that the contrast is between "immaturity" and "maturity" (*Gospel God's Empowering Presence*, 207-208). But Fee has not conceded enough. As the author of one of the most thoroughgoing commentaries on 1 Corinthians in English, he knows full well that the word has the *consistent* meaning of "mature" in this epistle. Fee adds, as a reaction to this view, "But that is unlikely, since Paul's contrasts here have to do with the partial nature of this gifts, not with the immaturity of the believers themselves" (Ibid). But this comeback is as irrelevant as it is unhelpful for Fee, since nobody claimed that Paul *was* referring to the immaturity of the believers here. May not the cessationist urge that the gifts are "partial" in comparison to the fuller apostolic body of teaching embodied in the New Testament?

⁵¹ Fee's "response" to this arguments is illustrative of his approach to the subject:

It is perhaps an indictment of Western Christianity that we should consider "mature" our rather totally cerebral and domesticated – but bland – brand of faith, with the concomitant absence of the Spirit in terms of his supernatural gifts!
(*1 Corinthians*, 645, fn. 23)

Note the clearly circular nature of this argument. Fee implies that it is obviously wrong to think that maturity might involve the removal of these gifts, even though the text he is commenting on expressly says that when this maturity comes these gifts *will* cease. In other words, in response to an exegetical case for the view that when maturity comes, certain gifts will cease, Fee has said "but that must be false because it would imply that maturity would be present without these gifts." Yes, that is what such an exegesis would imply, pointing that out is not a rebuttal! The rest of Fee's statement consists of emotive condemnation (e.g. "cerebral, domesticated, bland"), and contributes nothing to his position but an ugly hostility towards those with whom he differs.

⁵² Houghton makes the point that there is an important sense in which *faith* and *hope*, being an assurance of the future, of things not yet seen, will not remain after the consummation. Faith is associated with being absent from the Lord, but believing that we will be with Him (2 Cor 5:6-10). As Paul himself says elsewhere, "who hopes for what he already has?" (Rom 8:23-34).

This is not the same as saying that this maturity = the New Testament canon. Rather, it refers to the laying down of a body of Apostolic teaching, which was *later* recognised and canonised.

Bibliography

- Arndt, W. F. and Gringich, F. W., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958, 2nd ed.).
- Andrews, E.H., *The Spirit Has Come* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1982). First published under the title *The Promise of the Spirit*. Published under this title in 1991.
- Ashcraft, J. Morris, "Glossolalia in the First Epistle to the Corinthians," in Dyer, Luther B. (ed.), *Toungues* (Jefferson: Le Roi, 1971), 60-84.
- Best, Ernest, "The Interpretation of Tongues," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28:1 (1975), 45-62.
- Dayton, Donald, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987)
- Dunn, James D. G., *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*, New Testament Library (London: SCM, 1975).
- Edgar, Thomas R., "The Cessation of the Sign Gifts," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:580 (1988), 371-386.
- Fee, Gordon, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994).
- _____, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).
- Gaffin, Richard B., "A Cessationist View," in Grudem, Wayne (ed.), *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996), 25-64.
- Grudem, Wayne A., *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1982).
- Hill, David, *New Testament Prophecy*, Marshall's Theological Library (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979).
- Hinson, E. Glenn, Oates, Wayne E., and Stagg, Frank, *Glossolalia* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967)
- Houghton, Myron J., "A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:611 (1996), 344-356.
- House, H. Wayne, "Tongues and the Mystery Religions of Corinth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140:558 (1983), 134-150.
- Pearson, Birger Albert, *The Pneumatikos-Pshychokos Terminology: A Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and its Relation to Gnosticism*, SBL Dissertation Series 12 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1973)
- Robertson, O. Palmer, "Tongues: Sign of Covenantal Curse and Blessing," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38:1 (1975), 43-53.

- _____, *The Final Word: A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993).
- Ruthven, Jon, *On the Cessation of the Charismata* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993).
- Sawyer, M. James, "Dispensationalism," in Alister E. McGrath (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 106-112.
- Smith, B.L., "Tongues in the New Testament," *Interchange* 13 (1973).
- Soards, Marion L., *1 Corinthians*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999).
- Thiselton, Anthony C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000)
- Thomas, Geoffrey, "Spiritual Gifts and the Bible," *Banner Articles*, http://www.banneroftruth.co.uk/articles/spiritual_gifts_and_the_bible.htm 19th May 2001.