

Three Arguments for the Cessation of Tongues

By

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In a recent live radio interview regarding the subject of spiritual warfare and demon possession the host suddenly realized I did not believe the contemporary practice of exorcism and healing were valid. He quickly switched course and inquired if I believed the sign gifts were for today.¹ I replied that I did not, that they had clearly ceased by the end of the first century. Offended and taken off guard, the man defensively asked how I could hold such a position since there was only one conceivable passage in the Scripture on which I could base such a view. When I replied that there were several, he rudely hung up on me.

This conversation reflects the worst side of the debate between cessationists, those who believe the Scriptures teach that the sign gifts have not functioned in the church since the apostolic period, and non-cessationists. Too often those in the noncessationist camp have been guilty in recent years of using propaganda techniques to misrepresent the cessationist position rather than sound biblical exegesis to challenge the cessationist position.² As a pastor, I have frequently been told by those sympathetic to the charismatic position that I was putting God in a box. This is a distortion of the issue. The question is not, “can God the Holy Spirit still produce the gift of languages?” but rather, “what has God revealed about the purpose and function of the gift of languages and its limitations?” What the Scripture says, not personal experience, is the only criterion.

A second frequent unfair accusation is that cessationists are guilty of rationalism and common sense realism,³ and that at their core all cessationists are in fact anti-supernaturalists. This calumny is far from the truth. All of the cessationists I know are profoundly committed to the reality of divine involvement in human history, the validity of miracles in the Bible, and the ability of God to directly interfere in human history today and heal those whom He wishes directly rather than indirectly through gifted individuals. The issue is not “can God perform healings or miracles today?” but “has God revealed that this is to be normative and mediated through believers who possess such miraculous gifts?”

A third false accusation is that the cessationist position is restricted to dispensationalism. And in this conversation dispensationalism is pronounced in tones associating it with unacceptable cults like Mormons or Jehovah Witnesses. This of course reflects an ignorance in the historical verities. At the time of the rise of Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century its most vocal critics were among Reformed theologians such as B. B. Warfield. Even in one of the most recent publications on the subject it is a covenant theologian, Richard Gaffin, not a dispensationalist, who argues effectively against the continuationist position.⁴

Charismatics do not share the guilt alone for creating more heat than light. Cessationists, too, have been guilty of misrepresentation and labeling all tongues speech as either of the devil or the

¹ Sign gifts describe those spiritual gifts whose basic purpose was of a revelatory or confirmatory nature. These include tongues, interpretation of tongues, healing, discerning of spirits, word of wisdom, word of knowledge, prophecy, and miracles.

² I personally find Jack Deere’s caricatures of cessationists to be scholarly irresponsible and intentionally misleading. One of many egregious examples is Deere’s attempt to paint noncessationists with a liberal, rationalistic, “Bultmannian” brush. Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 111-12. Also see G. D. Fee, *God’s Power Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 887-88.

³ Common sense realism, sometimes known as Scottish common sense realism was a philosophical school that arose in the late eighteenth century in Scotland in reaction to the skepticism of David Hume.

⁴ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. “A Cessationist View,” in Wayne A. Grudem, Gen. Ed. *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 43.

result of some sort of psychological problem. As in any debate over the meaning of Scripture, discussion must be centered on sound exegesis and objective and accurate representation of opposing positions. Experience must be interpreted by the Word of God, the Word of God should not be interpreted through experience (Psa. 36:9; 119:105; Isa. 8:20).

A Brief Historical Perspective

In the 1960s and 70s charismatic defenders launched an effective counter attack against the cessationist position utilizing the big lie technique of Goebbels—anything stated loudly enough and repeatedly will eventually become accepted as true despite the facts. As the noncessationists continuously asserted that the “perfect” in 1 Cor. 13:8 could not possibly refer to the canon of Scripture, it became academically embarrassing to make such an assertion.⁵

This assault had become so effective that by the end of the century Richard Gaffin constructs his entire cessationist case without a single appeal to 1 Cor. 13:8, for which he is lauded by Robert Saucy.⁶ Unfortunately, Gaffin’s claim that the completed canon view is “just not credible exegetically” eviscerates his own position. A common theme among the responses to his position is the claim that there is simply no clear biblical affirmation that these gifts would cease in human history. It is the intention of this paper to demonstrate that the canon and/or maturity interpretation of 1 Cor. 13:8 is not only exegetically defensible, but that any other view effectively neutralizes the cessationist argument. It is time to re-examine the arguments to see if the canon position can come out of the closet. Three arguments for the cessationist will be set forth: an argument from the temporary nature of apostles and prophets, the natures of tongues a revelatory gift to be superceded by a complete revelation and the purpose for the gift.

The Apostles and Prophets

In the Old Testament the revelation of God was mediated through the prophets. The greatest of these was Moses (Deut 34:10). Moses’ ministry remained unsurpassed until the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the prologue to the Gospel of John, the writer affirms our Savior’s unique role in the history of revelation (John 1:14–18).

With the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, the human race had its most precise evidence of the person and character of God. More than anything penned in the Old Testament, the presence of the Incarnate God provided an intimate, unique glimpse into the person of God, so much so that Jesus stated, “If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father” (John 14:9). Nevertheless, in contrast to the prophets of old, our Lord did not write anything down for posterity. The only information available to subsequent generations is through the written witness of the apostles.

The writer of Hebrews attests to the significance of this in his introduction, contrasting the Old Testament revelation with that which came at the Incarnation (Heb. 1:1–2). In contrast to the bits and pieces of Old Testament revelation, God supplied an unsurpassable revelation in His Son—a Son who uniquely revealed the essence of God in His words and works. Numerous commentators have noted the significance of the contrast between the Old Testament revelation and that of Jesus as expressed in these verses.

⁵ Stanley D. Toussaint, “A Symposium on the Tongues Movement: Part II: First Corinthians Thirteen the Tongues Question,” *BibSac* Oct, 1963, 312–314.

⁶ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. “A Cessationist View,” in Wayne A. Grudem, Gen. Ed. *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 25-64; also the response by Robert Saucy, 65.

By the assertion that it was *in former times* that God spoke through the prophets, whereas it is in this final age that he has spoken through his Son. That quite distinct ages or dispensations are involved – the one marked by incompleteness and anticipation, the other by completeness and fulfillment, the one preliminary, the other ultimate—shows how fundamental the contrast is.⁷

Calvin noted the contrasting temporal references along with the aorist tense of the verb λαλέω, “spoke,” and drew the conclusion:

When he speaks of ‘the last times,’ he intimates that there is no longer any reason to expect any new revelation; for it was not a word in part that Christ brought, but the final conclusion.⁸

F. F. Bruce also affirms:

His word was not completely uttered until Christ came; but when Christ came, the word spoken in Him was indeed God’s final word. . . . The story of divine revelation is a story of progression up to Christ, but there is no progression beyond Him.⁹

And Hughes comments regarding the aorist tense of the verb “spoke,”

The past tense of the verb *spoke* indicates, further, that God’s speaking is complete: this is true not only of the past era of the Old Testament prophets but also of the present age of messianic fulfillment. God’s word in Christ has been spoken, fully and finally.¹⁰

As such Jesus is truly the foundation and chief cornerstone of the church (1 Cor. 3:11; Matt. 21:42 with 1 Peter. 2:6, 7). But He is not the only element of that foundation.

Since Jesus himself left no written documents, the only attestation to His words and works comes from His followers, the apostles. These twelve men were commissioned to carry on that work. To enable them in this revelatory work, they were given the Holy Spirit who recalled all things to their mind (John 14:26) and the ability to perform confirmatory miracles (Heb. 2:3–4). By this statement we understand the foundational ministry of the apostles, they were to be witnesses to the person and work of Christ and mediators of His revelation to mankind. As His commissioned representatives He spoke through them so that their word is God’s Word (1 Thess. 2:13).

Herein we understand the significance of this foundation. Christ is the cornerstone and the foundation, but knowledge of Him, His redemptive work, His calling of a new people, the Church, the new work of the Holy Spirit, and the inclusion of Jew and Gentile in that new body is only known through the revelation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20; 3:4–5).

The mention of apostles before prophets in both Eph. 2:20 and 3:5 indicates that Old Testament prophets are not in view. Further, Eph. 3:5 confirms that the prophets mentioned in Ephesians are connected to the ministry of the apostles, since both apostles and prophets function by means of the Spirit (ἐν πνεύματι). This pneumatic reference excludes Old Testament prophets from the reference.

⁷ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 37.

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Reprint, 1979) 33.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament The Epistle To The Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 3.

¹⁰ Hughes, *Hebrews*, 37

In these verses the church is depicted as a building under construction between the first and second advents of Christ (1:20–22; 4:8–10, 13). As with any construction project, first a foundation is laid, then the edifice is constructed upon that foundation. Once the foundation is constructed, it need not be repeated for each floor. Once it is done, it is finished for all time. Gaffin writes:

Christ is the foundation “already laid” (v. 11); that is, he is the foundation because of his death and resurrection (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:18, 23; 2:2; 15:34; 2 Tim. 2:8). All that he now is for and in the church depends and derives from his being the crucified and glorified Christ. He is the foundation of the church because of his finished work.

The apostles and prophets, then are not the foundation because they make up for some lack in Christ’s work. What is essential and otherwise lacking is an adequate witness to that work—in a word, a gospel witness. The apostles are Christ’s authorized witnesses, appointed by the resurrected Christ himself to bear authoritative testimony to his resurrection and its implications (e.g., Acts 1:2, 8, 21–26; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:1–4, 8–11; Gal. 1:1, 15–16.)¹¹

The combination of the Hebrews and Ephesians texts establish two vital points. First, the New Testament itself clearly distinguishes two stages in the current dispensation, the apostolic and, the post–apostolic period. Second, the key element of the apostolic period is the inscripturation of the apostolic witness in the New Testament canon.

The second conclusion is often challenged by cessationists. Fee dogmatically asserts that to discuss canon issues in 1 Corinthians 13 is to introduce twentieth century concerns into the first century and to force Paul to address a subject he had no interest in or knowledge of. However, this reveals on the part of the charismatic theology ongoing evidence of a shallow view of revelation and a truncated view of apostolic authority. First, Paul was aware of a closed Old Testament canon. Second, though he expected Christ’s imminent return he also knew this might be far off, during which time Church Age believers, like their Old Testament counterparts would need a written record. Third, Paul’s mandates to Timothy to guard “what has been entrusted” to him (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:12, 14) indicate a clear awareness of a finite collection of doctrine. Peter also indicates some awareness of a New Testament canon in his epistle (2 Pet. 3:15). Fourth, it is not unlikely, though unprovable, that the reality of a New Testament canon would be revealed to him. At the very least, if the apostolic community were closed, and revelation was authenticated only within the apostolic community, it would not have been difficult for him to deduce that revelation also would eventually cease. Which leads to the fifth reason, that if Paul in 1 Cor. 13:8–13 is affirming the temporary nature of the revelatory gifts, then he knew there would be a canon.¹²

Failure to recognize this distinction between an apostolic, pre–canon period, and a post–apostolic canon period has serious ramifications in bibliology. First, it attempts to distinguish between higher levels of prophecy which are inerrant and have an infallible authority and a lower level of revelation which is fallible and errant. Second, a view that maintains the continuation of all the gifts including apostle, seriously dilutes the authority and role of the apostles. Third, those that do recognize the cessation of the apostolic gift and office, fail to see the implications of that for any claims to ongoing revelation unless they reduce the significance of that ongoing revelation. If God

¹¹ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. “A Cessationist View,” in Wayne A. Grudem, Gen. Ed. *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 43.

¹² I find it ironic that the only ones who seem to have difficulty with Paul having an idea of a New Testament canon, and the only people who admit to the difficulty of understanding 1 Cor. 13:8–13; and 1 Cor 14:20–21 are those with noncessationist inclinations.

is the source of revelation, then anything sourced in God is inherently inerrant and possesses infallible authority. Even the noninscripturated revelation given to Agabus or through the daughters of Phillip was still inerrant and infallible. The cessation of the apostolic office clearly removes the check of apostolic authority and in effect would return the modern church to an open canon period with no apostolic guidance.

The Nature of Tongues as a Revelatory Gift

The Exegesis of 1 Cor. 13:8–11

In covering these verses four important observations need to be clarified. First, the significance of the shift in verbs and voice in verse 8, second, the meaning of “the perfect” (τέλειος) in verse 10, third, the temporal shift from “now” to “then” in verses 12 and 13, and fourth, the point of the two illustrations in verses eleven and twelve.

The context

Beginning in chapter 12 Paul outlined the significance of the spiritual gifts and their use for the benefit of the entire body of Christ. As a spiritual gift, the gift of languages followed the general purpose and regulation of all spiritual gifts. Gifts were specifically stated by Paul to be for edification of others in the body of Christ, not self-edification. For his very purpose Paul penned these chapters to correct the self-absorbed emphasis predominant in Corinth. As a spiritual gift, tongues by definition cannot be given for a private purpose such as devotion or praise to God, for this has primarily personal benefit. While the function of any spiritual gift may bring a sense of fulfillment to the one using it, and may provide a measure of satisfaction, elation, or joy to its user, this is only of secondary consequence and is not the purpose the Holy Spirit bestowed the gift. The one with the gift of teaching studies the Scripture in order to accurately teach others God’s Word. In the process he receives spiritual benefit, but this is not the purpose of his teaching gift, but simply a side benefit. This would also apply to the person with the gift of languages. Perhaps the speaker received some benefit or elation from the use of the gift, but since Paul argues that the language used was incomprehensible to the speaker, even some secondary substantive spiritual benefit would seem unlikely.

The Verb and Voice Shift

Contemporary scholars minimize the significance of the verb and voice shifts in verse 8. Prophecy and knowledge are said to be done away, the future passive indicative of καταργέω, “to abolish, put an end to, invalidate, wipe out or set aside.” Tongues in contrast is said to “cease,” the future, middle, indicative of παύω.

Many writers seek to dismiss this shift as mere rhetorical style. Carson for example, assumes the variation is simply stylistic and with no significance:

In short, I do not think that very much can be made of the use of παύσονται, in verse 8, any more than one can make much of other stylistic features that regularly escape detailed comment (e.g., prophecy and knowledge change their order when Paul’s moves from v. 8, to v.9).

Using the “stylistic” defense is frequently a subtle way of avoiding obvious emphases by an author, but has dangerous ramifications for the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration which states that every detail has some significance unless it can clearly be shown to not have significance (Matt.

5:17, 18). Carson and others who use the stylistic argument fail to demonstrate this exegetically, therefore their arguments must be dismissed.

Houghton, on the other hand, has attempted to justify a stylistic interpretation, but he, too, failed to recognize the importance of the word connections within the passage that make the verb and voice shift necessary.¹³ By recognizing this he could have strengthened his own argument. The subject of the paragraph focuses on the two gifts of prophecy and knowledge. By using a different verb for tongues, Paul prevents confusion as well as indicates that the gift of languages also will cease and that before the others are rendered inoperative. Paul clearly was not concerned with the overuse of the word καταργέω as some of the stylistic proponents assert, since he uses it four times in the passage. Each of these uses is significant and ties a thread through his main theme. First we learn that prophecy and knowledge are also both abolished (v. 8), but tongues simply stops. Second, we learn that prophecy and knowledge, are both partial, but the gift of languages is not said to be partial. Third, Paul states that the prophecy and partial knowledge, are abolished when the perfect (τέλειος) arrives. Thus suggesting that the arrival of the τέλειος is not the cause of the cessation of the gift of languages. And fourth, Paul specifically uses καταργέω a final time in verse 11, “I put away childishness,” to make sure the reader realizes the connection between putting away childishness and putting away prophecy and knowledge.

Divergent claims are made regarding the significance of the middle voice of παύω. Houghton argues that of the fifteen uses of παύω in the New Testament, thirteen are in the middle voice and suggests the verb maybe deponent.¹⁴ He provides Luke 5:4, 8:24, and 11:1 as some of the examples where an active meaning could be assigned to this middle voice verb. He argues that the reflexive idea is not necessary in these verses. Granting his conclusions, it does not prove the point that the verb change is stylistic. As stated previously, even if an active meaning is accepted, the verb shift still distinguishes the cessation of tongues from the abolition of prophecy and knowledge. Further, even with an active meaning the verb still means the gift of languages would stop. Toussaint’s conclusions are still therefore valid.¹⁵

It is not without significance that Paul uses καταργέω of both prophecies and knowledge when he says prophecies and knowledge will be done away.⁵ However he carefully selects the verb παύω when he speaks of the cessation of tongues. καταργέω means “to render inoperative, to supersede.” In the active voice παύω means “to make to cease.” Why this change? This change of verbs cannot be accounted for by saying Paul does this to avoid repetition. That Paul did not fear repetition is seen in the fact that he employs καταργέω no less than four times in verses 8, 10, and 11. The conclusion seems clear. Tongues are viewed as ceasing before Christ comes, while prophecies and knowledge are rendered inoperative by the Lord’s return.

Though this writer disagrees with Toussaint’s identification of the perfect with the return of the Lord, his point is nevertheless that tongues stops before prophecy and knowledge are rendered inoperative. The gift of languages are said to simply end. Tongues would cease because its purpose, to announce judgment upon the nation Israel for rejecting the Gospel, would be completed when the Roman legions under Titus destroyed that nation in August, A.D. 70. No longer having a purpose the gift disappeared.

¹³ Myron J. Houghton, “A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13,” *BibSac* (July 1996), 348

¹⁴ Houghton, *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Toussaint, “First Corinthians Thirteen: the Tongues Question,” *BibSac* Oct, 1963, 314–15.

The meaning of “the perfect” (τέλειος)

Seven interpretations have been suggested for the meaning of τέλειος (“the perfect”) in vs. 10: The completion of the canon (Merrill Unger, Joseph Dillow, Myron Houghton), the maturity of the church at the end of the apostolic age (Robert L. Thomas), at the time the believer dies and is face to face with the Lord (Thomas R. Edgar), at the Rapture (Stanley D. Toussaint), at the Second Advent of Christ (Charles C. Ryrie in the Ryrie Study Bible but he seems to suggest the canon view in *Balancing the Christian Life*), the eternal state (John F. MacArthur Jr.), and the eschaton in general (Gordon D. Fee).

These can be summarized in two groups, those that understand τέλειος in the sense of “completion” and those that understand τέλειος in the sense of something flawless or unblemished. Those in the first group understand the temporal references in 1 Cor. 13:8–13 to refer to the “now” of the apostolic age, the precanon period, or the first century, and those in the second group understand the temporal references to be generally “now” on earth, but “then” in the perfect presence of God. The canon and maturity view are in the first group, the other five fall into the second.

Thomas provides the exegetical insight which invalidates the second view. Τέλειος can have either a qualitative view, that is, something which can be partial or whole, or a quantitative view. With one possible exception, the New Testament never utilizes τέλειος in a qualitative way, in the sense of flawless or perfect.

For we know in part [□κ μέρους], and we prophesy in part [□κ μέρους]. (1 Cor 13:9)

But when the perfect [τέλειος] comes, the partial [□κ μέρους] will be done away [καταργέω]. (1 Cor 13:10)

Prophecy and knowledge were partial because knowledge of doctrine, especially that related to the mystery doctrine of the New Church Age was fragmentary in the precanon period of the Church Age. Revelation concerning mystery doctrine, doctrines pertaining to the unique spiritual life of the present Church Age, had not been completed. No single person, no matter how gifted had a complete knowledge of God’s plan or understood the entire counsel of God. When Paul penned 1 Corinthians only four New Testament books had been written. Therefore, revelatory gifts were still required to provide never before revealed doctrine to the burgeoning young Church.

Verse 10 stipulates that these partial gifts would be abolished when the perfect (τέλειος) arrived. Notice, it is the partial gifts (□κ μέρους) of prophecy and knowledge which will be discontinued (καταργέω, repeated from verse 8), not tongues. Tongues would simply cease (παύω). What then is the nature of the perfect that supplants the revelatory gifts? When theologians mistakenly identify the τέλειος with either the Second Coming of Christ, the perfection of heaven, the Rapture, or the Millennium, all the temporary gifts become normative for the entire Church Age. But can the perfect refer to that future event? No!

Close scrutiny of the Greek adjective τέλειος can mean “completed, mature, or perfect” “Completed” carries a *quantitative* connotation, describing a whole instead of a part, the conclusion of a process; “perfect” has a *qualitative* connotation of flawlessness describing something that lacks any blemish, or an idyllic or utopic state. Throughout the New Testament τέλειος and its cognates primarily refer to completion or maturity, a *quantitative* meaning (1 Cor. 12:2; 14:20; Eph. 4:13; James 1:4; 17). “In part” is a quantitative phrase and its use indicates that Paul had in mind something incomplete that would be brought to completion. Further, since the adjective is in the neuter gender it is unlikely that it refers to the coming of the perfect person of Christ which would

require a masculine adjective. Rather it must refer to an object like the canon of Scripture. Therefore, both context and grammar completely eliminate the possibility of perfection, being the Second Coming of Christ, a believer dying and going to heaven, or the millennium, as legitimate interpretations for τέλειος. Finally, 1 Cor. 13:13 specifically declares that *now*, in the present Church Age, faith, hope, and love continue, *but* prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will no longer be operative.¹⁶

Since the immediate context focuses on the partial or incomplete nature of prophecy and knowledge, τέλειος must be understood in the quantitative sense of complete. The perfect[]itself must also be related in kind to what it completes. Therefore it must be revelational because it completes the *in part* revelatory gifts. Elsewhere in the New Testament τέλειος describes the Word of God (James 1:25). In that same context (1:23) James also describes how the truth of God's Word functions like a mirror in the soul to reveal objective truth as a basis for self-evaluation for each believer. Paul uses this same mirror metaphor in 1 Cor. 13:12. τέλειος therefore, refers to the completion of the canon. Only the *completed* canon of Scripture, all the revelation needed to live the spiritual life, would render the *partial* gifts of prophecy and knowledge unnecessary once the final New Testament book was written (*ca.* A.D. 96).

One implication of this study becomes clear. If τέλειος has a meaning related to some flawless event, be it the rapture of the church, Second Advent, or simply the believer face to face with the Lord at death, then tongues, as well as the other sign gifts, must continue in human history until that event. To understand τέλειος in this manner is completely inconsistent with and undercuts the cessationist argument. Only when τέλειος is properly understood as the completed canon can a cessationist position be maintained. One other note should be made. Though some understand τέλειος to refer to the maturity of the church, they mark that maturity as arriving at the end of the apostolic period, a time that coincides with the closing of the canon of Scripture. So for all intents and purposes the maturity view and the canon view are the same. That which brings the church to maturity is a completed canon of Scripture authorized by the apostles.

Two Illustrations

The termination of knowledge and prophecy in the Church Age is confirmed by the apostle's two illustrations.

When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child;
when I became a man, I did away with childish things. (1 Cor. 13:11)

In this analogy the child represents the incomplete knowledge available to the infant, precanon church. Just as a child has inadequate knowledge to live as a mature adult, so the precanon church lacked a sufficient canon and doctrine to lead the spiritual life of the new Church Age. An adult reaches maturity when he is complete with the knowledge and skills necessary for life. So, too the postcanon church has the completed canon of Scripture which is sufficient for every need, every problem, every difficulty in life. Through learning the doctrines of the Word under the filling of the Holy Spirit the believer is able to pursue spiritual maturity.

The temporary gifts—apostleship, prophecy, knowledge, tongues, interpretation, miracles, healing—were necessary in the infant church to authenticate the message of the apostles and take up the slack until the New Testament could be completed. Once the final book of the New Testament was finished all the doctrine necessary for the spiritual life of the Church Age believer was available; revelatory gifts became obsolete.

¹⁶ Robert L. Thomas, "Tongues Will Cease," JETS, Spring 1974, 81–89.

The second illustration describes the partial nature of precanon prophecy.

For now [ἄρτι; now in this precanon period] we see in a mirror [incomplete canon] dimly [ἀνιγμᾶ] but then [when the canon is complete] face to face; now [ἄρτι] I know in part, but then I shall know fully [ἐπιγινώσκω] just as I also have been fully known. (1 Cor. 13:12)

“Now” translates the Greek ἄρτι, an adverb of time, meaning the immediate present, the precanon Church Age. In this passage Paul shifts from ἄρτι in verse 12 to a νυνί in verse 13. This shift is not stylistic. Though ἄρτι, and νυνί may frequently overlap, in passages where both occur, ἄρτι has a more immediate sense.¹⁷ Paul is contrasting the immediate now of the precanon, Church age to the then of the postcanon church age. This contrast is parallel to the partial/complete contrast of verses 8–10. At the immediate time Paul wrote, Christians were totally dependent on apostles and prophets with revelatory gifts to learn doctrine for living the spiritual life. Their knowledge was partial because they had a limited and incomplete revelation mediated through prophets.

The mirror analogy illustrates this principle. *To see in a mirror dimly* was an idiom for the vague imagery of prophecy derived from Numbers 21:27 (LXX).¹⁸ There, the lucid revelation given to Moses regarding Israel’s present situation is contrasted with the dark sayings given to other prophets, veiling the future in symbols and metaphor (Num. 12:7–8).

The revelation given to the prophets was mediated through dreams and visions, their meaning often obscured to the prophet through the imagery used. Only later revelation would clarify the meaning of these earlier prophecies. In contrast God spoke directly to Moses’ mouth to mouth, an image that conveys the clarity, precision, and completeness of God’s revelation to Moses concerning Israel’s present condition. Though this phrase is similar to “face to face” in 1 Cor. 13:12, this latter phrase cannot refer to “face to face” with God without destroying the mirror analogy. In a mirror a person looks at himself, not at someone else or God. In the comparison face to face must describe looking into something that accurately and clearly reflects oneself. When the believer gazes into the completed canon of Scripture he sees himself as he truly is. Paul contrasts the dim reflection of an incomplete canon with a clear, face to face reflection from a completed canon. This is clarified in the conclusion of the verse.

1Cor. 13:12 For now [ἄρτι] we see [ourselves] in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know myself in part, but then I shall know myself fully just as I also have been fully known.

Paul envisioned a time yet future when believers would have the entire realm of mystery doctrine to objectively know themselves as never before and be spiritually self-sustaining. Only God has a complete knowledge of the believer and only with a complete canon can the believer have sufficient, objective knowledge of himself. Through learning and applying doctrine from the completed and sufficient Scripture a mirror is constructed in his soul. This mirror of truth enables the believer to accurately and objectively evaluate his own life and circumstances from the divine viewpoint. Prior to the completed canon the believer could have only an incomplete understanding

¹⁷ Gerhard Kittel, [Nün (ἄρτι)], in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 4:1107, f. 8.

¹⁸ Gerhard Kittel, [Ai]/nigma, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 1:178–180.

of who he is and what he possesses as a member of the royal family of God, and all the vast assets God has provided for him. It is the completed Word of God that provides this sufficient, perspicuous understanding of ourselves as we truly are. Prior to the revelation of the mystery doctrine the believer looked into the mirror of God's Word dimly and saw a riddle, due to incomplete revelation.

The Temporal Shift from “Now” to “Then”

But now [νῦν] abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.
(1 Cor. 13:13)

In conclusion Paul reiterates the permanence of virtue—love. The now in verse 13 is different from the now of verse 12. Νῦν is broader, indicating the present age, the post—canon Church Age.¹⁹ Revelational spiritual gifts had a purpose and function within the plan of God during the formation of the canon. But once that was complete these gifts no longer served a purpose and were discontinued. The Book of Revelation contains the last prophetic utterances. When John completed the final chapter of the Bible, the canon was closed. Further attempts to add to Scripture were prohibited (Rev. 22:18). Over twenty years before the completion of the canon the gift of tongues had ceased. Tongues and the gift of interpretation were related to the nation Israel. Once that nation was eliminated under the fifth cycle of discipline by Rome in A.D. 70 tongues ceased to operate.

Nevertheless, in A.D. 70 the canon of the New Testament was not yet complete. The epistles of John and Jude were not written, neither was the Revelation. Once those were written, the canon would be complete and then revelation would cease. At that time the revelatory gifts of knowledge and prophecy would be abolished. But what would continue?

Now in the present church that which remains is faith, hope, and love. Love, as stated in verse 8, does not fail. Love, in contrast to the temporary nature of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge is to be the mark of the Christian as stated by our Lord (John 13:34, 35). Love even persists into the eschaton. Faith is the means of the believer's walk throughout this age, but will no longer be operative when we have “sight” (2 Cor. 5:7–8). Hope, confident expectation, will be realized at the appearance of our Lord, either at death, the Rapture, or the Second Advent. Faith and hope both cease once we are in the realm of direct sight with the Lord (Rom. 8:24). Since it is the qualitative appearance of our Lord in any of the senses offered (death, Rapture, Second Coming, eternal state or eschaton) that ends both faith and hope, these “perfect” ideas cannot be the meaning of τέλειος. Only love continues beyond human history.

What about future revelatory activities in Joel 2?

The context of 1 Corinthians 12-14 discusses the nature and regulations of spiritual gifts bestowed in the Church Age by God the Holy Spirit. These, by definition, were not bestowed prior to the advent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, A.D. 33. Thus prophecy in the New Testament was somewhat different from prophecy in the Old Testament. Whatever the dynamics of prophecy were in the Old Testament it was not a spiritual gift of the same order as in the New Testament. Thus, in 1 Cor. 13 we are confronted with the temporal nature of certain spiritual gifts related to the administration of the Church Age. This is quite different from the revelatory function described in Joel 2:28. Though both are energized by the Holy Spirit, it is incorrect to refer to prophecy and the

¹⁹ Gerhard Kittel, [Νῦν (ἄρτι)], in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 4:1107-1111. Νῦν is also used predominately for the period between the two advents.

function of revelation in the Old Testament as a spiritual gift. Therefore, the resumption of prophecy in the future in relationship to Israel is not the restoration of the spiritual gift of prophecy.

The Argument from Purpose

A plethora of purposes have been alleged for the gift of languages: evangelism,²⁰ prayer, private devotions, praise to God, revelation for believers, confirmation of apostolic status. While some of these may have been secondary effects of the function of this spiritual gift, there is only one clearly stated purpose for the gift and this is provided in 1 Corinthians 14:21–22.

In the Law it is written, “By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,” says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers, but to those who believe.

Much controversy surrounds the interpretation of this verse. Carson takes to task all those who affirm this passage as the single purpose statement for tongues to be “reductionistic” and their attempts to deny the private use of tongues to be “flimsy.”²¹ Unfortunately, Carson’s own argument for Paul’s private use of tongues is itself terribly reductionistic. He suggests that Paul’s admission of speaking in tongues (14:11) implies a rejection of speaking in tongues in church and therefore means that Paul must have been exercising the gift in private. But in the church and in private are not the only available options. Each of the three episodes of tongues speaking in Acts were in public, but not in the church meeting. Not only does Carson’s interpretation of 1 Cor. 14:11 beg the question, (Carson ignores the possibility of hyperbole here), but he is blind to the negation of his own argument by the biblical events recorded by Luke.

What did Paul mean when he said “tongues are for a sign?” To answer this we must investigate the context of the Old Testament quotation in Isa. 28:11.

The events of Isaiah 28 occurred seven centuries before the birth of our Lord during the time Israel was threatened by the encroaching Assyrian Empire. As this threat deepened Isaiah warned the Northern Kingdom of Israel that their disobedience to God and rejection of the teaching of His Word would bring defeat as judgment on their apostasy. Rather than relying on the sufficiency of God’s Word and power Israel sought succor through an alliance with Egypt. In Isaiah twenty-eight he levels an indictment against Israel and foretells their future destruction.

Isaiah vividly describes the decline of the degenerate religious leaders in their drunken orgies.

And these also reel with wine and stagger from strong drink: The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink [barley beer], They are confused by wine, they stagger from strong drink [barley beer]; They reel while having visions, They totter when rendering judgment. For all the tables are full of filthy vomit, without a single clean place. (Isa. 28:7–8)

Tragically the religious leaders reject Isaiah’s prognosis of Israel’s spiritual condition. They no longer have the capacity for learning the truth and mock the teaching of Isaiah (28:9, 10). Isaiah

²⁰ Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts: The Christian’s Special Gifts in the Light of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 224–5. Thomas R. Edgar, *Miraculous Gifts: Are They for Today?* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux, 1983), 146ff.

²¹ D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 105, 108–112. Sadly Carson, whose pen drips with vitriol accuses Edgar of having an angry tone.

frames his brilliant reply in a play on words. Since the people and the religious leaders would no longer listen to God in their own native language, they would hear the harsh tones of a foreign gentile language in the land bequeathed to them by God.

Indeed, He will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue, He who said to them, “Here is rest, give rest to the weary,” And, “Here is repose,” but they would not listen. (Isa. 28:11–12)

That God’s covenant people in their own land would be addressed in a jarring foreign language had been foretold by Moses. This was to be a sign of divine judgment on the nation (Deut. 28:49). The sign of this harsh judgment would be that the Jews would be addressed in their home towns in a language they could not understand. There is no suggestion in either Isaiah 28 or Deuteronomy that the content of this language would include a message from God. Simply the presence of the “stammering lips and a foreign tongue” would indicate the reality of judgment.

In the first century the Jews again rejected God’s message and God’s Messiah. In one of the most dramatic scenes of human history a small group of men began to preach in Jerusalem in Gentile languages they had never studied nor learned. Again Israel is confronted with the sign of impending divine judgment. For this reason Paul alludes back to the context of the Isaiah warning and applies that warning to his Corinthian audience. The carnal Corinthians were to avoid the childishness that characterized the ancient apostate Jews (1 Cor. 14:20).

Following his quotation of the Isaiah passage Paul then draws a conclusion for application as indicated by the use of the Greek particle $\omega\sigma\tau\epsilon$. It is inescapable that Paul believes that quote to explain the exact purpose for the miraculous gift of languages. As Robertson and Plummer comment:

Tongues have a further use, as a sign to unbelievers, not a convincing, saving sign, but a judicial sign. Just as the disobedient Jews, who refused to listen to the clear and intelligible message which God frequently sent to them through His prophets, were chastised, by being made to listen to the unintelligible language of a foreign invader, so those who now fail to believe the Gospel are chastised by hearing wonderful sounds, which they cannot understand. If this is correct, we may compare Christ’s use of parables to veil His meaning from those who could not or would not receive it.²²

To strengthen this case we must note the use of the article with $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$. Though it is not translated in the English, the presence of the article in the Greek points to a direct application to the Jews of Paul’s day. Hodges comments regarding the use of the definite article:

The use of the definite article with the Greek word for “tongues” ($\alpha\iota \gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha\iota$) does not appear in the AV of this verse but must not be overlooked. Inasmuch as the article gives to the word $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha\iota$ a pointed specificity, it further confirms that Paul finds *this particular* phenomenon to be the thing referred to by the Scripture he has cited. It is not simply “tongues” in general to which Isaiah of old refers, but “*the* tongues” of which the apostle has been speaking throughout.²²³

²² Archibald Roberson and Alfred Plummer, *The International Critical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1914), 316.

²³ *Bibliotheca Sacra.*, electronic edition. (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1998).

That this is the divine purpose for the gift is indicated by the prepositional phrase, εἰς σημεῖον, a common idiom for stating purpose. The presence of tongues may have had some evangelistic, revelatory, or even devotional secondary benefit, but its purpose in human history is to warn Jews of God's impending judgment on Israel.

However, some raise the question that Paul does not specify unbelieving Jews, but simply unbelievers. First, in the context of the Isaiah quote, he speaks of "this people." Second, the construction of the Greek is not clearly reflected in the English translation which makes the contrast between "those who believe" and "unbelievers" seem parallel. In the Greek the phrase ἀπίστος translated unbeliever, is a noun in contrast to the participle form used for those who believe. As Hodges observes, this shade of difference seems to fix the unbelief more soundly as is seen in the ongoing rejection of Jesus as Messiah by the Jews.

The Greek adjective construction, τοῖς ἀπίστοις, rendered by the AV, "them that believe not," here is not distinguished by the English version from the preceding participial construction τοῖς πιστεύουσιν, "them that believe," but they are not identical. The fact that either two participial constructions, or two adjectival ones, could have been used if precise, exact opposition of the two expressions were intended points to the conclusion that a certain shade of difference existed in the apostle's mind.³ The adjective ἀπίστος under these circumstances would—in contrast to a participial form—express pure description as over against the *action* of believing involved in the foregoing participle. Thus ἀπίστος, as a description, is more static and hence more inherent in tone. Accordingly, even this grammatical nicety seems emphatic with the spirit of the Isaiah prophecy which deplores a *condition* of unbelief so tragically fixed that not even the sign—gift of tongues can arouse the nation from it.

Further, Paul states in the next verse that for this reason tongues was not to be used in the church lest the unbeliever think them mad. Some argue that this means just the opposite. But the next verse states, "if *all* speak in tongues," (emphasis added). Paul does not say, if one or two, but if *all*. He describes a state of disorder with no interpretation. This cacophonous scene would seem like madness to any unbeliever, Jew or Gentile.

Some object that this purpose is too narrow and does not fit the historical episodes in Acts. But this is exactly what is discovered in the three episodes related in Acts.

Acts 2. On the day of Pentecost only the eleven disciples spoke in tongues, not the one hundred twenty who had temporarily gathered at Peter's request to select a replacement disciple for Judas. It is highly unlikely that so many would have remained together in the small upper room apartment. Further, the nearest antecedent for the third person plural reference "they" of Acts 2:1 is in the final plural phrase of Acts 1:23, "the eleven apostles." Thus only the eleven were gathered in one place when the church was born.

Unbelieving Jews were gathered in Jerusalem from many different regions for the second annual pilgrimage feast, Pentecost. Although sixteen regions are mentioned, careful study of the languages involved indicate that probably no more than eight or nine had extant languages. The regions of Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia had been conquered by the Greeks in the fourth century BC and had been speaking Greek as, at the very least, the lingua franca of their region. It is doubtful if any of their ancient dialects had survived into the first century A.D. Furthermore, the ancient Medes had been assimilated into first the Persian then Parthian empire, where Aramaic was the language of the marketplace. Cyrene was a Roman colony, the Latin there as familiar as that in Rome. There were indeed several different speakers of native languages present, but not more than a handful. Just like the seventh century citizens of Samaria, the Jews present suddenly heard the

unfamiliar sounds of Gentile languages reverberating from the walls of the Temple. To be sure, those present heard the disciples witness to “the mighty works of God” including the gospel. But the stunning fact was that Gentile languages were heard in the Temple precinct, a clear sign of judgment for those who remembered Isaiah’s warning.

Subsequent events confirm this. Peter addresses the crowds in either Aramaic or Greek, not in a multitude of languages. It was not necessary to speak multiple languages to win these converts. Only after his sermon were the three thousand saved. And throughout his message he emphasized the theme of responsibility for rejecting Jesus as Messiah, and the invitation of God to repent, change their mind, and accept Jesus as their Messiah. The gift of languages caught their attention, but it was the content of Peter’s message in one language that clearly communicated the gospel.

Acts 10. The second occurrence of tongues had Peter and a few other Jews with him. The content of the tongues speech was “exalting God,” no hint of teaching or evangelism. Word of what happened spread throughout Judea. When Peter returned to Jerusalem the circumcision party called him on the carpet and he gave his report. Though only a handful of Jews were present, the grapevine made it clear that another evidence of God being praised in Gentile languages confronted the Jews. It is not necessary to be present for the sign to be valid or effective.

Acts 19. In Ephesus Paul was confronted by a group of loyal disciples to John the Baptist. These disciples were possibly Old Testament saints, yet they had not heard of Jesus saving work on the cross. When Paul laid hands on them the Spirit gave them utterance and they spoke in unlearned Gentile languages. This again would be evidence to the many Jews in Ephesus. Not only did it confirm the approach of judgment on the Jews, but its occurrence outside of the land confirmed God’s new work which included Gentiles.

Since the purpose for the gift of tongues was to confirm God’s judgment on the nation Israel as prophesied in Lev. 26 and Deut. 18 it was no longer necessary after 70 AD. Once Judea was decimated, the Temple in ruins, and Judaism judged, the Church could achieve its own separate identity and carry out the Great Commission. With a complete canon they had sufficient knowledge to face any and all situations. They had all that God deemed necessary to grow and mature.

Conclusion

Together these three arguments weave an intricate refutation of the noncessationist position. The Bible itself testifies to an apostolic and post-apostolic environment related to revelation. The Scripture further asserts that these revelatory gifts would cease along with the gift of apostle and its confirmatory signs. Further, the presence of a completed canon would provide the church with the mature knowledge necessary for spiritual advance. Tongues, prophecy, knowledge would no longer be necessary.