

That Glorious Day When Tongues Are Not Needed: Until Then . . .

Robert Graves

Part 1 of 2

“Tongues shall cease.” More than 1,900 years have passed since the apostle Paul penned this prediction in a letter to the Corinthians (c. AD 54), and not a few cessationists have argued that the future tense of the verb (cease) is no longer warranted—the use of the past tense is now justifiable, or so the argument goes. Anti-charismatic Robert G. Gromacki concludes his book, “‘Tongues...shall cease’ (1 Corinthians 13:8). They have” (p. 143). And according to cessationist George Zeller, Paul’s injunction not to forbid tongues “no longer applies today” (p.104).

The Pentecostals and charismatics agree with cessationists that the charismata (spiritual gifts) as described by Paul and Luke are temporary. The disagreement arises when one attempts to determine the factor (and thus arrive at an approximate date) responsible for the cessation of these manifestations of the Spirit. For the charismatic, Scripture, Church history, and personal experience indicate that all of the gifts are to continue through the Church Age. But for the cessationist, the prophetic, miraculous “sign” gifts ceased with the early Church. Some say the cessation was immediate; others claim it occurred over several decades, tapering off gradually.

Cessationists’ Arguments

The anti-*charismata* cessationists use, for the most part, four arguments to prove the cessation of tongues: (1) Tongues were a sign; (2) Tongues were revelatory in nature therefore the completion of Scripture ended all revelation; (3) After Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth (AD 54), the New Testament is completely silent on tongues, therefore, they had ceased; (4) Historical writings of church leaders after AD 100 do not indicate a continuance of the charismata.

Thus the conjectures about the date of the cessation usually range from AD 54 (prior to the writing of I Corinthians) to the second century (allowing time for the apostles’ last charismatic disciple to die or the New Testament to become “available” and “circulated”). If this time frame is correct, the most any guess could be off the mark is about 150 years. This estimate is far from being off 1,900 years, a possibility the Pentecostal and charismatic must consider. Likewise, the cessationist must consider the possibility that the charismatic interpretation has validity.

The first important modern theologian to give detailed consideration to the cessation of the gifts was B. B. Warfield (1851-1921). Warfield lists four different factors, either proposed or endorsed by him, which he contends were to affect or coincide with the cessation of the charismata:

1. When the Apostolic Age passed (p.6).
2. When the last disciple to whom the apostles conferred a gift died (p. 23-24).
3. When the whole knowledge of God designed for the saving health of the world had been incorporated into the living body of the world’s thought (p. 26).
4. When the revelation of God in Christ had taken place and had become in Scripture and the Church a constituent part of the cosmos (p. 27).

No specific date can be pinpointed from these factors.

Douglas Judisch, writing some sixty years after Warfield, gives five factors or dates for the cessation of tongues:

1. In AD 70 with the destruction of the temple (p. 43).
2. With the death of John, the last apostle (p. 49).
3. Shortly after John's death (p. 63).
4. When the apostles' last charismatic disciple died (p. 76), and
5. When the Christian matured in the faith; for Paul it was prior to his writing of 1 Corinthians in (AD 54) (p.83).

Thus Judisch suggests five different dates for the end of tongues that range from AD 54 to some time in the second century. He suggests that in these five dates are two kinds of cessation, the cessation of distribution, and the cessation of operation, but does not define one specific cessation point.

In the years since Warfield and Judisch defined their ideas of cessation, others have made their own suggestions and mostly have a difficult time picking one date when tongues are assumed to have ceased. The chart I have prepared on page 51 underscores the cessationists' inability to delineate only one cessation factor (and date). Of the 38 authors in the survey, only sixteen defend one date, and some of these add qualifiers; for example, Zeller writes, "on or before 70 AD" (p. 90). W. A. Criswell says tongues "ceased almost immediately" but fails to anchor the "immediately" to any firm, categorical factor: "The Church grew up and no longer needed the sign" (*Baptism* p.122). Thus, even many of those choosing only one factor do not speak with certainty. However, Gardiner and Schutz not only state one factor but a definite year with absolute certainty. Both choose AD 70. "When Titus the Roman sacked the city of Jerusalem and dispersed the Jews over the world in 70 AD," Gardiner writes, "the reason for tongues disappeared and the gift ceased in and of itself. Since then there have been no Biblical tongues spoken" (p. 36).

Tongues are for a Sign

George Gardiner, Vernon Schutz, and other cessationists who believe that the sole purpose of the gift of tongues was as a sign to the Jews place incredible weight upon 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 (which quotes Isaiah 28:11-12): "In the Law it is written: 'Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me,' says the Lord. Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers." Cessationist Walter J. Chantry calls this passage the "foundation text for tongues" (p. 58). Zeller argues that Paul's use of Isaiah shows that Paul believed the only place to gain an understanding of tongues was in the Old Testament (p. 77). First Corinthians 14:22 is so central to Vander Lugt's argument that it is printed on the front cover of his book. Pfeil writes (and underlines) the following about these verses: they are "*the only specific purpose statement on tongues in the entire New Testament*" (p. 38).

For some cessationists, these verses, *and only these*, prove that tongues had a *specific and singular purpose*, and that purpose was to condemn unbelieving Jews. That was the *raison d'etre** of the gift of tongues (Judisch, pp. 41-42).

Once the singular function of tongues has been established through these verses, there is yet another step cessationists use to prove that tongues have ceased. It must be asserted that God has ended His judgment upon the Jews. We are told that this took place in AD 70 when the Roman emperor Titus leveled the Temple. Therefore, since the Jews have for all time been judged and since tongues were for *only* that purpose, the reason for tongues has been removed. Tongues, as Judisch writes, "pass[ed] away quietly with the smoke that arose from the temple fire" (p.43).

It cannot be established, however, that the Jews were once-and-for-all judged in AD 70; that is a theological construct, not an exegetical conclusion. Furthermore, the gift of tongues serves more than one function (see my articles in the Spring 1999 and Fall 1999 issues of the *Pneuma Review*).

The success of the cessationist's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 is based upon another assertion which, I believe, has not been proven. It involves a comparison of Paul's and Isaiah's words.

An attempt to match up Paul and Isaiah point-for-point reveals a major weakness. For example, in Isaiah the "words of judgment" are spoken by an invading pagan army; in Paul, they are spoken by Corinthian Christians. In Isaiah the speakers, who represented God's judgment, would speak learned Assyrian; in Paul, the speech was an unlearned, unknown language. A strict point-for-point representation was not Paul's intention. Rather, Paul is saying that just as the strange words of another people would not

be of benefit to unbelieving Jews, so your charismatic tongues are of no benefit to unbelievers who enter your meetings.

Furthermore, in his use of Isaiah, Paul does not quote the original Hebrew, nor does he quote the Septuagint, its Greek translation. This, along with the incongruous parallels already noted, argues for a very loose and, thus, general correspondence between the two passages. It seems that Paul just wanted to capture the idea of the uselessness of everyone speaking in other tongues when unbelievers were present.

Because of the tenuous nature of the cessationist argument from 1 Corinthians 14:21-22, other arguments have been posed. One that has gained acceptance among non-charismatics considers tongues a sign of apostolic certification. Cessationists have attempted to link tongues inextricably with the office of apostleship, reasoning that if they can prove that apostleship has ceased, they have dismissed tongues also.

Tongues and Apostles

The first modern cessationist to develop the theory that tongues and the apostles were inseparable was B. B. Warfield. No one has improved his argument, but many have restated it. He wrote in 1918: “They [the special gifts] were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church. Their function thus confined them to distinctively the Apostolic Church, and they necessarily passed away with it” (p. 6). Forty-five years later, Hoekema quotes Warfield in his argument and concludes that “the purpose and function of the special miraculous gifts of the Spirit was to authenticate the apostles as true messengers from God. ... If the miraculous signs were intended to authenticate the apostles, they would no longer be needed after the apostles had done their work” (*What*, pp. 109-110). Stibbs and Packer come to the same conclusions concerning the “special manifestations” of the Spirit:

Their purpose, according to the New Testament, was *dispensational* rather than personal; that is, they were given to authenticate the Gospel and its first messengers, and to mark publicly the transition from the era of the old covenant to that of the new. The need for them ended when the apostles’ unique ministry was finished and the writing of the New Testament was completed.

(p.33).

Especially note the words “according to the New Testament” because it will soon become apparent that the New Testament nowhere states that (1) certain gifts of the Spirit were for the purpose of authenticating the apostles or (2) the gift or office of apostleship would cease.

Second Corinthians 12:12, “The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance,” is one Scripture that is used to wed tongues to apostleship. Paul’s argument, it is said, would be illogical if all Christians were performing these things (MacArthur, p.80; see also Romans 15:18-19). What the cessationists overlook, however, is that it was the Corinthians and the “super-apostles,” not Paul, who placed the emphasis upon “signs, wonders and miracles.” It was they who placed such phenomena at the top of the apostolic certification criteria. Paul’s writings indicate that for him apostleship was certified not by charismatic phenomena but by evangelism and changed lives. “You are the seal of my apostleship,” he told the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 9:2; see also Mark 16:15-17).

In light of I Corinthians 12:28 (“And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues” NASB), it appears that displays of healing or miracle-working power do not certify one as an apostle and are not limited to the office of apostleship. This verse makes it clear that there were in the Church apostles, workers of miracles, those having gifts of healings, and those with gifts of tongues. No doubt miracles occurred under Paul’s ministry, but he does not consider them important signs of apostleship or limited only to apostles. After listing many of his trials and persecutions he writes, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (2 Corinthians 11:30). For Paul, there were greater indicators of apostleship than “signs, wonders and miracles.”

Other verses used to support the argument that signs mark the apostles are those in Acts 8, 10, and 19 that describe the episodes where, through the apostles, new converts receive the Holy Spirit, prophesy, and speak in other tongues. Since Luke records this happening only under the apostles’ direction, cessationists feel that is an indication that tongues were solely part of the early Church. But we must remember that Luke’s history is so devoted to the Twelve and Paul that his book became known as “The Acts of the Apostles.” It is not surprising that accounts of the early church leaders—the apostles—are linked to the expansion of the Church and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon each new group of believers

Also, Luke records instances of signs and wonders when apostles were not present. When Philip evangelized Samaria, God wrought “great signs and miracles” (Acts 8:13). Only *after* this did the apostles visit Samaria. Philip was also instrumental in the eunuch’s Spirit baptism (Acts 8:30-39; Bruce, *Acts* p. 190). Elsewhere in Acts 9 an unheard of Christian by the name of Ananias laid hands on Saul of Tarsus (Paul) and he was filled with the Holy Spirit (v.17). In Acts 8 and 9 we see that signs and wonders are not limited to apostleship, and the bestowal of the Spirit (Spirit baptism) is not limited to the apostolic ministry. The fact that Luke’s history is limited to the apostles and their contemporaries—Acts is a history of that time by an author of that time—does not automatically imply that the signs stopped there.

After “proving” that tongues were limited to the ministry of the apostles, the cessationist now argues that the office of apostle ceased. Seven scripture passages are referenced for this purpose.

First is Ephesians 2:20—“[You are] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” The argument, as Stott states it, is that “once the foundation of a building is laid and the superstructure is being built, the foundation cannot be laid again” (pp. 100-101). C. R. Smith writes, “The church Jesus is building was founded on the apostles. There is no need for apostles today unless the church is to be refounded—and if so, another cornerstone should be required!” (p.72).

Let’s look at the context of this passage. There is no hint here that Paul’s concern is the cessation of apostleship. In this passage, his actual concern is the oneness that we in Christ have. Notice the verses that Ephesians 2:20 is nestled among: “For through him [Christ] we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household. . . . In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord” (verses 18-19, 21). These verses are not remotely concerned with *when* the offices of apostle and prophet cease. Instead, Paul writes these words so that factions and inferiority might cease. We are *one* in the Spirit!

It should also be noted that the cessationist interpretation of this passage is self-defeating. In verse 20 Paul says that the Ephesian church was built upon the apostles and prophets, *past tense*. That being the case, apostleship and prophecy could no longer be in operation at the time of Paul’s writing to the Ephesians, for a building cannot be raised until the foundation is finished. If they have ceased, how can Paul continue to receive and transmit divine revelation? If the cessationist interpretation of Ephesians 2:20 is correct, Paul did not have the authority to say that apostleship and prophecy no longer existed, for he would no longer be an apostle.

Furthermore, two chapters later Paul writes that it was Christ “who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (4:1 1-13; emphasis added). Until we have unity, until factions cease, we will need to work to build up the Church body.

What then does Ephesians 2:20 mean? Simply put, it means that just as the early Jewish church was built upon the teachings of the apostles and prophets, so too was the Gentile church. We are one. If we must twist this verse until it seems to say something about apostles and prophets, I suppose we could claim it teaches that apostles and prophets are instrumental in founding churches, whether in Jerusalem, Corinth, Ephesus, or Atlanta, Georgia. It is Christianity’s and, therefore, the world’s loss that we do not recognize, esteem, and support men and women who have these gifts or offices. Many men and women whom the Church weakly and hesitantly sends out with the word of salvation should be boldly sent out as apostles and prophets of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let them shout it from the rooftops; let them proclaim His goodness throughout the earth; let their voices of light pierce the darkness! Or, should we listen to the voice of unbelief: “There are no apostles today, no prophets either, no healings, no miracles, no tongues”? God forbid!

The second passage used by cessationists to prove that the office of apostleship ceased is Acts 1:21-22, which describes the replacing of Judas with Matthias: “Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.” These verses indicate that only a man who had walked with Jesus “the whole time” and had witnessed His resurrection could qualify for that apostolic ministry (Criswell, *Baptism*, p. 61).

There is no disagreement here between Pentecostals and charismatics and cessationists. Judas’ replacement had to fulfill certain requirements that locked the office into the first century. He had to (1) be baptized by John, (2) be with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry, and (3) be a witness of Jesus’

resurrection. Beyond Judas, the Bible nowhere informs us of the replacement of one of the Twelve, even though it records the death of the apostle James, the first martyred apostle (Acts 12:2). But the question arises, Were these the only apostles or a special twelve among apostles?

This question brings us to another passage used by cessationists. It is actually a cluster of three passages: "Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel'" (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29-30 parallels Matthew here). John wrote, "The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Revelation 21:14). Pentecostals and charismatics can agree with W. A. Criswell: "When they died the office ceased to exist. There are no more twelve apostles" (*Baptism*, p. 61).

These Scriptures prove beyond doubt that the twelve apostles were unique. When these men died, indeed, the particular positions they held as the first twelve apostles ceased. But were these the only apostles? Paul is called an apostle, so is James, the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19), also Barnabas (Acts 14:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5-6), Silas (1 Thessalonians 1:1 and 2:6), Timothy (1 Thessalonians 1:1 and 2:6-7), Andronicus (Romans 16:7), and Junias (Romans 16:7). In his apologetic for the resurrection of Jesus, Paul lists as eyewitnesses the Twelve, 500 brothers, James, then all the apostles, and finally himself (1 Corinthians 15). Obviously, apostleship was not limited to the Twelve.

Second Corinthians 11:13 speaks of "false apostles"; 2 Corinthians 12:11 speaks of "super-apostles." It is unlikely that such terminology would have developed if it were not possible for there to be more than the Twelve apostles. It should also be noted that Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and the "super-apostles" of 1 Corinthians 12 (or at least the Corinthians' attitude toward them) demonstrate that "signs, wonders and miracles" were not limited to the Twelve.

The next passage that is claimed to deny apostleship beyond the first century is 1 Corinthians 15:8-9: "And last of all he [Christ] appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." These verses, it is argued, suggest that Paul was the last apostle (Gaffin, p.90; C. R. Smith, p. 72). But is the context of these verses concerned with the length or limit of the office of apostle? Not at all! These verses are from a passage that is an apologetic for the resurrection of Jesus. Here, as in all of the passages that are supposed to prove the end of apostleship and therefore the special manifestations of the Spirit, any conclusions are incidental and tenuous (assuming they are even related). Paul is not calling himself the last apostle; rather, he is saying that he was the last of all those listed to see the resurrected Jesus.

The final passage used by cessationists is Hebrews 2:34, "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." This passage, writes cessationist Donald Burdick, "speaks of the evidential purpose of tongues," which confirmed the "eyewitnesses who passed on the facts of this great salvation, . . . for the most part, the apostles of Christ" (p.27). Cessationist George Zeller agrees; these special "sign-gifts were given to authenticate and confirm the word of the apostles" (p. 115). Having asserted this, it still must be shown that this passage also proves that these spiritual manifestations have ceased. Cessationist Joseph Dillow writes that when the author of Hebrews penned this book he "seemed to be unaware of the existence of the miraculous gifts in the church" (p.107). The author "had not seen the confirmation of 'signs and wonders and divers miracles,'" writes Criswell, which proves that "these signs had died out" by the second generation (*Baptism*, p. 80; see Ryrie, p. 84). Burdick, using his knowledge of the Greek language, asserts that the "verb tenses do not indicate that these things were still in the process of occurring" (p.38). Though some cessationists are cautious about their use of these verses, others use them with thoughtless abandon. Vander Lugt says that these verses "definitely" and "positively" prove that tongues have ceased (pp. 70-71).

The intent of the writer of these verses, as is seen from the context, is to warn readers to pay attention to what they had heard from those who had heard Jesus firsthand. The words of eyewitnesses, he adds, were attested to by signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is no mention here of apostles, much less the Twelve. For the sake of argument, however, we might assume that the writer had apostles in mind. What that means for us today is that the Gospel of Christ, delivered by his apostles, may be attested to by signs, wonders, miracles, and spiritual gifts! If anyone wishes to do away with apostles, signs, wonders, and miracles, he must be consistent and abolish other spiritual gifts, for they too are in this verse. (Most cessationists realize this and divide spiritual gifts into temporary and permanent.)

As for the argument of cessationists—Dillow, Criswell, Ryrie, and others—that the writer of Hebrews was unacquainted with these special manifestations of the Spirit, F. F. Bruce answers in his commentary on

this verse: “The New Testament writers (including our author at this point) would not have appealed to the evidence of these miraculous manifestations if there was any possibility that their readers would reply that they had never seen or heard of such things. They were matters of common knowledge and widespread Christian experience . . .” (pp. 30-31).

Finally, if we look closely at Burdick’s conclusion from the Greek language—“Verb tenses do not indicate that these things were still in process of occurring”—we see that this is actually an argument from silence. Burdick tells us only what the verses do not say. We can just as surely say that these verses do not indicate that special manifestations of the Spirit have ceased. The past tense that is used here (“was confirmed”) was called for because the described event was in the past; the signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts occurred in the past with the past preaching. Obviously, this initial past occasion could not be described as still happening. Therefore, the signs that accompanied the past occasions could not be described as still happening; they ceased with the occasion. This is no restriction on signs accompanying the preaching of the Gospel today.

Of these passages of Scripture that are used by cessationists, first, to prove that tongues were a sign of apostleship, and, second, to prove that the office of apostle has ceased, not one of them intentionally deals with what the cessationist is using them to prove. Since the New Testament writers were not addressing the issue of apostolic signs and the cessation of apostleship, the interpretations given these verses are invalid and misdirected.

To be continued in the next issue...

A day is coming when prophecies, words of knowledge, and tongues shall cease. When that day arrives, no one will be rejoicing more ecstatically than the charismatics. But until then. . .

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