

The Cessation of Tongues and Prophecy
in the Reformed Tradition
by Greg Loren Durand



The Historic Reformed View of the Charismata

Despite the recent popularity of certain high-profile Calvinistic continuationists, such as Mark Driscoll and John Piper, the historic position of the Reformed faith on the *charismata* is undeniably cessationist. In fact, a commitment to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* requires this. For example, John Calvin referred to “certain giddy men” of the Sixteenth Century who “imagine that they have some peculiar way of penetrating to God” apart from the written Word, and denied that “the office of the Spirit” was “to form new and unheard-of revelations, or to coin a new form of doctrine, by which we may be led away from the received doctrine of the gospel. . . .”¹

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Henry Beveridge Translation), Book I, Chapter IX:1.

So important did the Westminster divines of the following century consider this subject that they included these statements in the opening chapter of their Confession of Faith:

Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of His Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased. . . .

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.²

This was also the position of those outside of the Reformed tradition, such as Martin Luther, who insisted that because God gives His Spirit "only through the ex-

2. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter I:1, 6.

ternal Word," he who "would hear God speak, let him read the Scriptures,"³ and the great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, who believed that "the earlier miraculous gifts have departed from us."⁴

Tongues as a Sign of Impending Judgment

Tongues and prophecy both had a very specific role to play in the early days of the Christian Church. Not only were they clearly sign gifts which were given to validate the message of the Apostles, but, as in the case of tongues, also served as a warning to the unbelieving Jews of the imminent destruction of their apostate nation. In Isaiah 28:11-12 we read: "For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people, to whom He said, 'This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest,' and, 'This is the refreshing'; Yet they would not hear." These words were spoken by the prophet to the people of Judah as a declaration that their rebellion would soon be judged by God through an Assyrian invasion.

The presence of "unknown tongues" was likewise mentioned by Moses in his prophecy of the ultimate destruction

3. Martin Luther, commentary on Psalm 119; Ewald M. Plass, editor, *What Luther Says: An Anthology* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), Volume II, page 62; *ibid.*, Volume III, page 1359.

4. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Receiving the Holy Spirit," sermon preached on July 13, 1884.

of national Israel found in Deuteronomy 28:49: “The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you will not understand.” The entire New Testament deals with the period just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the termination of the Jewish economy in A.D. 70. God began His warnings to the rebellious nation of Israel through John the Baptist, who was sent to declare that the Kingdom was at hand. Following the death of John, Jesus picked up this same theme and began to warn Jerusalem of impending destruction should the people not repent of their rebellion. Of course, the Jewish leaders sealed the nation’s doom when they rejected and crucified their Messiah. It was not until Israel had thus transgressed against her God that the gift of tongues was introduced among the Apostles and their associates on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2); they were then used to call them to repentance. In this sense, they were, as Paul wrote, “for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers” (1 Corinthians 14:22); they served as an indictment against Israel and a public declaration that her “house [was] left . . . desolate” (Matthew 23:38), and that the Kingdom of Heaven was about to be taken from the Jews and given to another people — the Gentiles (Matthew 8:10-12, 21:33-45).

The Role of Prophecy in the Early Church

Having established the purpose of biblical tongues, let us now determine the role of prophecy in the early Christian

Church. According to Paul, in contrast to tongues, “[P]rophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe” (1 Corinthians 14:22). Since the New Testament canon was still being written, via the epistles of Paul, Peter, and the other Apostles, prophecy served to edify and strengthen the infant Church in the midst of intense persecution, and to offer hope that God’s enemies would soon be destroyed (Revelation 2:8-11). However, with the close of the canon, this purpose was fulfilled, and prophecy ceased.

In Jude 3, we read: “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” This verse is very important in dealing with the finality of revelation and prophecy, for in it Jude clearly anticipated the closing of the New Testament canon of Scripture. The phrase “once for all” is noteworthy. Actually, only one Greek word (*ἄπαξ* – *hápax*) is used here, which indicates “what is of perpetual validity, not requiring repetition.” Hence, the Scriptures themselves preclude any further revelation beyond the apostolic age.

Another verse that may be cited in this regard is Ephesians 2:20: “. . . [The Church has] been built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.” Paul thus informs us that the teachings of the New Testament Apostles and the proclamations of the Old Testament prophets together provide the foundation of the Church. A building can have no more than one foundation, and the Body of Christ is

certainly no exception. John 14:26 tells us that the Apostles were taught “all things.” In addition, Paul commanded Timothy to “keep” the “good thing which was committed” to him in 2 Timothy 1:14. Clearly, this “good thing” was identifiable or else Paul’s exhortation would have been in vain. Since the Apostles were taught all things, there would be no need for further revelation. Indeed, what can be added to *all things*? Furthermore, the Apostles’ doctrine became part of the canon, and because this revelation was complete, there can be no further “scripture” added (either verbal or written) unless it can be demonstrated that the apostolic era has not ended. However, as noted above, the apostolic era served as the transition period between the old economy and the “new heaven and new earth” (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1) of the New Covenant; once the transition had been made, the apostolic era, with its various sign gifts (2 Corinthians 12:12), ceased:

These gifts were distinctly the authentication of the Apostles. They 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. The miraculous working which is but the sign of God’s revealing power cannot be expected to continue, and in point of fact, does not continue after the revelation of which it is the accompaniment had been completed.⁵

5. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1918), pages 5-6.

Daniel's "Seventy Week" Time Frame

The New Testament, of course, is not the only place from which the cessation of the revelatory gifts may be established. The Old Testament also foretold a time when God would no longer speak through His prophets. For instance, in Daniel's prophecy of the "Seventy Weeks" we read: "Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy" (Daniel 9:24). It is clear from verses 25-27 that once the "Seventy Week" period (490 years) had begun, it would continue uninterrupted until completed. Since the prophetic "clock" began to tick "from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem," which was given by King Cyrus (Ezra 1) exactly 483 years prior to the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River, we must look for the terminus of this period in the First Century. As prophesied, Christ's death and resurrection made an end of the sins of His people (the elect), and therefore He accomplished the reconciliation promised by God through Daniel (Romans 5:10; Colossians 1:21). Christians have consequently experienced "everlasting righteousness" because of the fact that we are clothed in His righteousness, which itself is everlasting (2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 6:14; Philippians 3:9; Revelation 19:8). The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is also directly linked to the "Seventy Week" time frame. This is proved by verse

26: "And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, and till the end of the war desolations are determined."

Finally, we come to the phrase, "to seal up vision and prophecy," which is included within the "Seventy Week" time frame. According to E. J. Young:

Vision was a technical name for revelation given to the OT prophets (cf. Isaiah 1:1, Amos 1:1, etc.). The prophet was the one through whom this vision was revealed to the people. The two words, vision and prophecy, therefore, served to designate the prophetic revelation of the OT period. . . . When Christ came there was no further need of prophetic revelation in the OT sense.⁶

Since there is no essential difference between Old and New Testament revelation, and the source of inspiration was the same God, there is no reason to doubt that all giving of new revelation ceased in the First Century.

Zechariah 13:3-5 is another passage that closely ties in with Daniel 9:24:

It shall come to pass that if anyone still prophesies, then his father and mother who begot him will say to him, "You shall not live, because you have spoken lies in the Name of the LORD." And his father and mother who begot him

6. E. J. Young, *Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), page 200

shall thrust him through when he prophesies. And it shall be in that day that every prophet will be ashamed of his wisdom when he prophesies; they will not wear a robe of course hair to deceive. But he will say, "I am no prophet, I am a farmer; for a man taught me to keep cattle from my youth."

The context of this passage of Zechariah places "that day" in the First Century (see 12:10, 13:1, and 13:7). There is no denying then that continuing prophecy or revelation subsequent to the closing of the canon is viewed by God as worthy of the most severe punishment, and even of death. Why? Because it is false prophecy in view of the fact that God no longer speaks with men in a revelatory fashion, whether it be through the vehicle of unknown tongues, prophetic utterances, or the writing of additional "scripture." Indeed, to insist otherwise is, in effect, to say that God's revelation of Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ, is insufficient. The Scripture says otherwise: "God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the Prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Conclusion

In closing, it should be noted that, aside from a relatively small number of fringe and heretical groups throughout the centuries (i.e., Montanism in the Second Century, Mormonism in the Nineteenth Century, etc.), tongues and

prophecy were not recognized as continuing by anyone in the history of the orthodox Christian Church. The “miraculous gifts” reappeared in the so-called Pentecostal “revivals” of the early Twentieth Century, and beginning in the 1960s, the Charismatic movement gave them a more widespread introduction to the professing Church that transcended denominational lines. However, the quality of these alleged gifts falls far below that of their first-century counterparts, and, in the case of the senseless gibberish which passes for “speaking in tongues” today, bears no resemblance whatsoever to what is described in the New Testament.

It is also significant that the vast majority of those who claim to possess these gifts today are grossly ignorant of the most basic doctrines of Scripture and are, in many cases, proponents of outright heresy (i.e., followers of the Word of Faith Movement, the Manifest Sons of God, etc.). This is not surprising, because if the above arguments for cessationism are correct, the manifestation of supernatural phenomena, such as tongues or prophecy, must be the “power, signs, and lying wonders” of “another spirit” (2 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Corinthians 11:4). It is not without good reason that Scripture warns, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

As a whole, modern Charismatics are guilty, much like the “certain giddy men” of Calvin’s day, of willfully rejecting the final testimony of the written Word of God in

favor of the “ear-tickling” of false prophets. Does it not seem strange that God would choose to “pour out His Spirit” upon such rebellious people today, while failing to so “bless” those within the Reformed community who have remained faithful to His Word? Such a question is food for thought, indeed.

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