

Tongues—Are They for Today?

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Introduction

The issue of the continuation of tongues is not a new one, and literature on the topic is abundant. The few sources noted in the footnotes of this presentation scarcely scratch the surface of the body of literature on the topic, and I do not purport this morning to disclose any new arguments on the issue that have heretofore gone untapped. Frankly, the argument against tongues has already been made, and has been, I believe, objectively convincing for years. Unfortunately, not all positions that are objectively *proven* are *persuasive*, particularly when the only ground of persuasion acceptable to some audiences is experiential in nature. And for this reason alone, the issue of tongues is worthy of being revisited today.

But I think that there is another significant reason to revisit the issue of tongues today, namely, that the practice of tongue-speaking has undergone a number of changes in the past two decades or so, and the arguments against them must be recast with greater care and different emphases than in previous generations. B. B. Warfield's *Counterfeit Miracles* was excellent in its day, running roughshod over a rather wild and woolly expression of "miraculous gifts" that was so overtly unbiblical that a child could see it. And while his basic arguments are sound (and still apply directly to a swath of tongue-speaking charlatans in the broad church today), a much more reserved and Scripture-conscious expression of tongues is emerging today that sees Warfield as speaking to someone else—not to them. Even more recent works like John MacArthur's *Charismatic Chaos* (1978, 1992) speak most directly to an expression of miraculous gifts that differs significantly from the more "reasoned," "careful," "moderate," and "qualified" expression that is meeting with significant approval in evangelicalism today.¹

We should add, too, that the quarters from which this new wave of tongues-speaking is coming are much closer to us theologically and much more credible academically than previously. There has been, first, a spike in sympathy for tongues from within dispensationalism, historically a stronghold of cessationism,² and specifically *progressive* dispensational sources (e.g., Robert Saucy). There has also been a strong upsurge in sympathy for tongues among Reformed thinkers, likewise traditional proponents of cessationism,³ on both a popular level (e.g., John Piper and C. J. Mahaney) and in the academy (e.g., Wayne Grudem). Coupled with the recent upsurge in

¹In fact, we need look no further than MacArthur himself for evidence of this. In the last few years he has had at least two known continuationists freely speak from his own pulpit—something that 20 years ago would have been so unlikely as to be laughable.

²In addition to MacArthur, see, e.g., Thomas R. Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996); Robert Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972); Merrill F. Unger, *The Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974); etc.

³In addition to Warfield, see, e.g., Robert L. Reymond, *What About Continuing Revelations and Miracles in the Presbyterian Church Today?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977); Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Final Word: A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1993); Anthony A. Hoekema, *What About Tongue-Speaking?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); etc.

appeals for conservative evangelical unity around the gospel and its tendency to minimize differences on “non-essential” doctrines, a milieu that is ripe for the allowance, accommodation, and even embrace of tongues has emerged in conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism today.

All this has tended to a much softer stance on tongues than the circles represented in this room have previously allowed. And even when books promoting cessationism are written, there seems to be a pressing need to affirm the evangelical credentials of continuationists, to give token acknowledgement to the contribution of continuationism to evangelicalism, and even to concede various points of continuationism. Dan Wallace, for instance, introduces the book *Who’s Afraid of the Holy Spirit*, which he co-edits, with the forthright assertion, “I am a cessationist,” even, he adds, a “hard-line” cessationist.⁴ But he concedes that “through the experience of my son’s cancer, I came to grips with the inadequacy of the Bible *alone* to handle life’s crises. I needed an existential relationship with God.”⁵ He adds,

Through this experience I found that the Bible was not adequate. I needed God in a personal way—not as an object of my study, but as friend, guide, comforter. I needed an existential experience of the Holy One. Quite frankly, I found that the Bible was not the answer. I found the Scriptures to be helpful—even authoritatively helpful—as a guide. But without my feeling God, the Bible gave me little solace. In the midst of this “summer from hell,” I began to examine what had become of my faith. I found a longing to get closer to God, but found myself unable to do so through my normal means: exegesis, scripture reading, more exegesis. I believe that I had depersonalized God so much that when I really needed him I didn’t know how to relate. I looked for God, but found many community-wide restrictions in my cessationist environment.⁶

Wallace concludes, “I am increasingly convinced that although God does not communicate in a way that opposes the scriptures, he often communicates in a non-verbal manner to his children. ... To deny that God speaks verbally to us today apart from the Scriptures is not to deny that he communicates to us apart from the scriptures.”⁷

In these words lies a final reason for pressing the need for cessationism in today’s milieu, and really the heart of my concern today, namely, that the practice of tongues (and all revelatory gifts) is not as innocuous and peripheral to the *Kerygma* as is often portrayed. Allowance for tongues and continuing revelations from God (whether verbal and non-verbal) betrays, fundamentally, a distrust or at best a diminution of the sufficiency of Scripture to speak in all its grammatical/historical/theological simplicity to all of life.⁸ Once we concede that the Scriptures

⁴Introduction to *Who’s Afraid of the Holy Spirit*, ed. Daniel B. Wallace and M. James Sawyer (Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2005), p. 2.

⁵Ibid., p. 1.

⁶Ibid., p. 7.

⁷Ibid., p. 9.

⁸Sam Waldron suggests that highly subjective views of Spirit guidance among conservative evangelicals (reflected in phrases like “God told me,” “God directed me,” etc., and most starkly in the violent rejection, in many quarters, of Garry Friesen’s objective, wisdom-based approach to guidance expressed in his *Decision-Making and the Will of God*) has left them particularly vulnerable to revelatory tongues-speaking as promoted by charismatics: “One of the reasons charismatics have been so successful in promulgating their views among Evangelicals is because Evangelicals themselves have come to a place where they have very loose and subjective understandings of

need revelatory supplementation, we have in principle surrendered one of the very most basic doctrines of evangelical Protestantism, *viz.*, *sola scriptura*. And this doctrine is one that we dare not abandon.

We will return to this theme later in this presentation. But now let us delve into the case for cessationism, first defining several key terms and establishing a historical setting, and then offering some objective, exegetical/theological reasons why the doctrine of continuationism is to be rejected.

Definitions

The term *cessationism* in this presentation refers to the understanding that all of the miraculous gifts practiced by the early church have been suspended for the duration of the present age. This is not to say that God is necessarily restricted from intervening in his universe in a miraculous manner today (though some cessationists argue such), but that the miraculous *gifts*, including tongues, have ceased in the church. Nor is it to say that God will never again bestow miraculous powers to his people—allowance is generally made here for their resumption at some point in the eschaton.

The term *continuationism* in this presentation refers to any non-cessationist position—the view that at least some of the early gifts practiced in the early church are still to be practiced today. This is not to say that *all* the gifts necessarily continue today, that *all* believers must exhibit miraculous gifts, or even that these gifts are permanently at the disposal of certain believers (though some continuationists argue any or all of these points).⁹ At the risk of oversimplification, the cessationist and continuationist positions are to be regarded, for the purposes of this presentation, as mutually exclusive and comprehensive categories.

The term *glossolalia*, it shall be argued below, refers specifically to the supernatural practice of speaking in a known language that one has not acquired by natural means. Since this term has been expanded beyond this natural definition to include a variety of ecstatic utterances that have no inherent linguistic meaning, some have opted for the more precise term *xenoglossia*.

Historical Background

One of the lesser arguments that might be supplied for cessationism is the virtual absence of tongue-speaking from the apostolic period until the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ While this

important passages of the Word of God.... There has been a real tendency to devotionalize and spiritualize the Bible in a way that was made to order and set a lot of people up, when a charismatic came with his views, to not see all that much difference between charismatic subjectivism and the prevailing evangelical subjectivism.” In short, Waldron suggests that acceptance of tongues, on a grass-roots level, can generally be traced to a hermeneutically-induced rejection of the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (“Tongues! Signs! Wonders! An Interview with Dr. Sam Waldron,” December 8–9, 2005, available at <<http://www.challies.com/archives/interviews/tongues-signs-w.php>>, Internet).

⁹As such I include under this term the “Open but Cautious,” “Third Wave,” and “Charismatic/Pentecostal” views represented in the four views book, *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

¹⁰I describe this as a “lesser” argument because it is, after all, an argument from silence—both logically and literally. Nonetheless it seems to be a notable silence. If speaking in tongues, like the other gifts, is a gift bestowed sovereignly by the Spirit (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:11, 18; Heb 2:4), it would seem logical that these would continue.

absence is not absolute, most of the examples of glossolalia from this period are isolated, sectarian, generally quite mystical, and frequently heretical¹¹—and modern-day continuationists themselves often hesitate to appeal to these as determinative.

The modern-day phenomenon of tongue-speaking has come in a series of three “waves.” The first, Pentecostalism, is the most theologically driven of the three. Sparked by two concurrent, late-nineteenth-century surges of interest, viz., eschatology (a time when, biblically, tongues will reemerge) and an incompletely defined dispensational emphasis on the Spirit’s new work of Spirit baptism in the present era (which was often accompanied in the scriptural accounts by tongue-speaking), Pentecostalism matured into independence around the turn of the last century.¹² Emphasis on tongue-speaking in this first wave was on miraculous gifts as a subsequent affirmation of salvation occasioned by the crisis commencement of a second “stage” of Christian commitment at Spirit baptism.

The second “wave” of tongue-speaking, Charismatism, is the least theologically driven of the three waves. Not properly an expression of any one theological system, Charismatism is more a way of doing worship. As such, Charismatism spread across both Protestant and Roman Catholic denominational lines. Charismatism began roughly around 1960 and has continued ever since.

The “third wave,” a term coined in 1980 by Peter Wagner, represents something of a reining in of Charismatism, but should not be regarded as a return to Pentecostalism. While the third wave is far from monolithic, it is generally marked by (1) an abandonment of the baptism of the Spirit as a crisis event subsequent to conversion and (2) moderation with respect to the necessity and importance of glossolalia—like the rest of the gifts, the gift of tongues is selectively given and, in keeping with 1 Corinthians 14, is not even among the “greatest” of the gifts.

The Arguments for Cessationism

1. The Quest for an Elusive Proof Text

Perhaps the easiest way to argue a point of theology or practice is to cite a concrete text or set of texts that unambiguously affirm the point to be made. Some, in fact, will accept nothing less than such a proof text. Such zeal for the priority of Scripture is admirable, but unfortunately exhibits a failure to grapple with the complexities of meta-exegesis and the *analogia fidei* that underlie some of the most important doctrines in all of Christian theology.

Having said this, I allow for the possibility that 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 may supply such a proof text. I also contend, however, that the argument rests on several exegetical obscurities that render this conclusion far from certain. The point of cessation in this text, viz., the arrival of the

While it is possible for believers to seek specific gifts (1 Cor 12:31; 14:1, 39) and for believers to fail in the exercise of their gifts due to a lack of faith (Mark 9:28–29), God’s ability to bestow of gifts is not restricted by human faith, and we would expect them to continue unabated in the age for which they are appointed.

¹¹See, e.g., Hoekema, *What About Tongue-Speaking?* ch. 1; Edgar, *Satisfied by the Spirit*, ch. 8.

¹²The Azusa Street Revival, which began in 1906 and ran for about ten years, is often cited as the event around which Pentecostalism coalesced as an independent system of thought. For a detailing of the historical factors leading to the formation of Pentecostalism, see Donald W. Dayton, “The Theological Roots of Pentecostalism” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1983), ch. 4.

“perfect,” may be the closing of the canon¹³ or possibly the maturation of the church,¹⁴ but probably refers to the state of affairs that accompanies the revelation of Jesus Christ to the believer either at the point of physical death or at the Second Advent—a revelation that immediately usurps all lesser forms of revelation. Though the final understanding is the virtually unanimous understanding of continuationists,¹⁵ it is by no means an understanding that is exclusive to continuationists—several cessationists (including myself) join in adopting this view.¹⁶ As we shall see below, however, occasions for the miraculous are rare even in biblical history, and their practice is normally in a state of suspension. Suggesting that tongues and other miracles might possibly reappear at the close of human history is by no means an affirmation that tongues must continue unabated until that time.

In short, it does not seem, despite the great furor that surrounds the passage, that the argument for cessationism rises or falls on the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13. In fact, in view of the great variety of interpretations that this passage enjoys, it would seem that cessationist appeals to this passage alone will rarely be convincing to the continuationist. While I allow that this passage might possibly contribute to the cessationist argument, it seems advisable to pursue a more robustly exegetical-*theological* argument for cessationism.

2. *The Argument from the Nature of Tongues as “Signs of an Apostle”*

One of the foremost gifts given to the early church was the gift of apostleship—a gift that takes pride of place on at least two NT gift lists (Eph 4:11; 1 Cor 12:28). The priority of apostleship is primarily *temporal* in nature, but there also seems to be a suggestion that this gift carries with it a broader scope of responsibility and authority than any of the other gifts. Specifically to our discussion, apostles are described in 2 Corinthians 12:12 as arbiters of the miraculous gifts (viz., signs, wonders, and miracles) such that these are denominated “signs of a true apostle.” If this designation is to have any meaning at all, it follows that we should not regard miraculous gifts (including tongues) as the property of all believers or of believers in every era. These are not “signs of a true believer,” but rather phenomena exercised “by virtue of the presence and activity of the apostles...under an ‘apostolic umbrella,’ so to speak.”¹⁷

¹³So e.g., R. Bruce Compton, “1 Corinthians 13:8–13 and the Cessation of Miraculous Gifts,” *DBSJ* 9 (2004): 97–144; Unger, *Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, pp. 138–45; Reymond, *What About Continuing Revelations and Miracles?*, pp. 30–36; Myron J. Houghton, “A Reexamination of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13,” *BSac* 153 (July–September 1996): 344–56.

¹⁴F. David Farnell, “When Will the Gift of Prophecy Cease?” *BSac* 150 (April–June 1993): 171–202; Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), pp. 77–84; Donald G. McDougall, “Cessationism in 1 Cor 13:8–12,” *TMSJ* 14 (Fall 2003): 207–13.

¹⁵So D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 66–76; Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, rev. ed. (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 2000), pp. 227–52 *et passim*; and nearly all continuationists.

¹⁶See, e.g., Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, pp. 243–46; Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, pp. 109–12; Stanley D. Toussaint, “First Corinthians Thirteen and the Tongues Question,” *BSac* 120 (October–December 1963): 311–16; R. Fowler White, “Richard Gaffin and Wayne Grudem on 1 Cor 13:10: A Comparison of Cessationist and Noncessationist Argumentation,” *JETS* 35 (June 1992): 173–81. See Acts 2:43; 8:18.

¹⁷Richard B. Gaffin, “A Cessationist View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* p. 39. Gaffin rejects

This having been said, then, the obvious follow-up question is whether the gift of apostleship continues today. The continuationist community is divided on this point, with newer, more conservative and academically cautious expressions tending to agree that the gift of apostleship ended in the first century, and older, more populist “waves” tending to allow for the continuation of apostolism.

An apostle, by definition, is one who has been “given the legal power to represent another” so as to be “as the man himself,”¹⁸ an astonishing authority that the early church regarded with extreme sobriety. In keeping with the practice of the period, apostleship could only be awarded directly by the one whom the apostle represented—in this case, Christ himself. Great emphasis is placed on Christ’s appointment of the apostles (Mark 3:14; Luke 6:12; Acts 1:2; 10:41); even Paul, the “abnormal” apostle (1 Cor 15:8, NIV), was insistent that his apostleship could not have been had by any indirect agency (Gal 1:1). When the disciples sought to replace Judas as apostle, they expressed a necessity to find someone who was an actual eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22), a qualification that, again, Paul regarded as absolutely essential to apostleship (1 Cor 9:1). In short, in order even to be eligible for apostleship, one must have had literal contact with Christ during his earthly ministry, both seeing and hearing Christ physically. This understanding, which expressly limits the apostolic office to the first century, is furthered by the fact that the apostolic office, together with the prophetic office, is regarded as *foundational* of the church (Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14), and the fact that Paul considered himself to be not only the least but the *last* of the apostles (1 Cor 15:5–9).

In view of these exegetical considerations, the trend among more cautious continuationists today is to concede that the apostolic office no longer exists.¹⁹ This is a welcome reflection of fidelity to Scripture that we should celebrate. It raises, however, a theological tension that cessationists may rightfully exploit. Indeed, as Waldron notes, “The admission that the apostolate has ceased is a fatal crack in the foundation of Continuationism.”²⁰ This is true for at least three reasons:

- The admission that apostolism has ceased is *de facto* an admission that spiritual giftedness in the church today differs from spiritual giftedness in the early church—a crippling blow to many continuationist models.
- The admission that apostolism has ceased also seems to lead necessarily to the admission that the “signs of an apostle” must likewise have ceased—that is, unless one can find some new biblical basis and foundation for these gifts.²¹

Warfield’s understanding that miraculous gifts were exercised only by those upon whom the apostles personally laid hands as too “mechanical.” The extent of the exercise of tongues in the NT (and especially as described at Corinth) seems to bear out Gaffin’s broader understanding. See Acts 2:43; 8:18.

¹⁸Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 2nd rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1988), p. 14.

¹⁹See, e.g., Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 906, 911; D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, pp. 91, 156.

²⁰Waldron, *To Be Continued?* p. 23. This point represents Waldron’s thesis and the starting point from which all his arguments for cessationism flow in a linear fashion.

²¹As we shall see below, this is, in fact, the tack of many “open but cautious” continuationists today. It is

- The admission that apostolism has ceased, finally, militates strongly against the continuation of all forms of special revelation (including tongues). The significance of Christ's direct appointment of apostles and his literal, physical interaction with them is related directly to the prerogative to receive and transmit divine revelation. In fact, the privilege of bearing authoritative witness to Christ is restricted explicitly to those who had been with Christ from the beginning, were eyewitnesses of Christ's earthly ministry, and who had been explicitly commissioned by him (Luke 1:2; John 15:26–27; Acts 10:39–41; 1 John 1:1–3). Direct, divine revelation in the early church was always channeled through *apostles*, either directly or by apostolic influence.

In summary, fidelity to the scriptural conception of apostleship and the necessary conclusion therefrom that the apostolic office is no longer active seems to conclusively eliminate all historical appeals to NT practice for the continuation of tongues.

3. *The Argument from the Purpose of Tongues as Attesting New Revelation*

The purpose of miraculous capacities in the early church was not limited to the attestation of divine messengers, but also included the attestation of their revelatory message (Heb 2:4). This is not to suggest that miracles were never expressions of divine compassion or that tongues never had a didactic function (e.g., Acts 2:5–12), but, as Saucy notes, that “the *primary purpose* of the miracles was as signs of authentication pointing to God, his messengers or spokesmen, and their message, which was the word of God.”²² This seems to be the reason that the term “sign” (σημεῖον) is regularly used to denote tongues. A sign, according to the foremost NT Greek lexicon, is an “indication or confirmation of intervention by transcendent powers.”²³ Attention here is on the subordination of the sign to that which it signifies—viz., that God is breaking into the natural order to disclose himself in some way.

Paul makes this point very clear in 1 Corinthians 14 when he notes that the edifying value of tongues is lost apart from an accompanying prophecy for the church. He writes, “If I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?” (1 Cor 14:6). In short, he regards the existence of signs without attendant prophecy as an absurdity. And while Paul allows that the interpretation of tongues might supply that attendant prophecy, he notes that this is abnormal in the church—tongues are *normally* means of assuaging skeptics (14:22), not ordinary conduits for revelation.

Peter echoes this sentiment when he describes the “prophetic word [i.e., Scripture] made more sure” by virtue of the miracle of transfiguration (2 Pet 1:19–20). Commentators are divided whether the verse is describing Scripture as “more sure” *than* the miracle of the Transfiguration,

common today to see defenses of continuationism appeal not backward (to the apostolic period), but *forward* to the eschaton, which is making rearward inroads into the present. This represents a fundamental shift in the defense of continuationism that demands new arguments from the cessationist perspective if it is to continue to be relevant. See below.

²²Robert L. Saucy, “An Open but Cautious View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* p. 106. Saucy goes on to observe that tongues are not employed in the book of Acts to attest *teachers*, but only *prophets*, that is, those who served as direct spokesmen for God as the “first witnesses” of Christ (p. 109).

²³BDAG, s.v. “σημεῖον,” p. 920.

or as “more sure” *because of* the miracle of the Transfiguration. In either case, however, our point is made: the role of miracles is subordinate in function to the inscripturated Word. And once that inscripturated Word has been sufficiently attested, the major function of miracles and tongues disappears.

And it is here that my greatest concern with tongues comes to the fore. If the foregoing is true, then the continuance of tongues implies that Scripture is a source of revelation that is inadequately attested and/or insufficient for the needs of the present dispensation (violating the spirit of such texts as 2 Timothy 3:17 and 2 Peter 1:3–4). In short, it is an implicit denial of the first-order doctrine of *sola scriptura*—a denial that stands as easily the most deleterious wall breach in the fortress of orthodoxy in the whole history of the church. At *best* this understanding threatens Scripture’s unique authority and causes people to neglect Scripture in lieu of other sources of instruction and guidance, and at worst it opens up the faith to an unbounded host of non-orthodox additions and emendations.²⁴

4. *The Argument from the Purpose of Tongues as Kingdom Markers*

In Hebrews 6:5 we discover that the miracles performed by our Lord and by the early church described as the “powers of the age to come.” Dispensationalists have long used this text as decisive in arguing for cessationism—tongues are not for this age, but for the kingdom age, and so we should expect them to disappear after the kingdom offer has been rescinded and the kingdom program has been properly adjusted to the present NT arrangement.

I still believe this is a sound argument. However, the widespread popularity of “realized eschatology” that swept through Christianity at large in the 1930s, overtook evangelicalism in the 1950s, and finally penetrated dispensational theology in the 1990s has tended to overturn this argument. As we noted earlier, the newest arguments for continuationism are much less rearward in focus, and correspondingly more forward-looking: tongues are not a lingering expression of an ancient church practice, but an anticipatory expression with eschatological import. Seizing on the apparent fulfillment language of Acts 2:16–21 with reference to Joel 2:28–32, these argue (1) that the speaking of tongues in Joel 2 is clearly eschatological in nature, (2) that its fulfillment began

²⁴I would be remiss at this point to ignore the protests of conservative continuationists, many of whom cling tenaciously to the inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of the Bible and who are exemplary models of expository preaching. Wayne Grudem, for instance, argues that the allowance of miraculous gifts in the church today need not conflict with “a strong affirmation of the closing of the New Testament canon (so that no new words of equal authority are given today), of the sufficiency of Scripture, and of the supremacy and unique authority of the Bible in guidance” (*Gift of Prophecy*, p. 18). These doctrines may be maintained by a continuationist, he affirms, if we recognize that, unlike OT prophecies, “prophecy in ordinary New Testament churches was not equal to Scripture in authority but was simply a very human—and sometimes partially mistaken—report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone’s mind.” This fallibility of modern-day revelations, prophecies, and by extension tongues ostensibly safeguards the priority of the biblical record.

To me this explanation creates a great number of problems (e.g., an inexplicable dichotomy between OT and NT prophecy; renegade, non-authoritative, private revelations that are divine in origin, but which are also unverifiable and potentially untrue; etc.) and solves none. Grudem’s protests notwithstanding, it seems impossible to integrate Grudem’s continuationism with his affirmation that “Scripture contains all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 127). For a thorough rebuttal of Grudem see Waldron, *To Be Continued?* pp. 61–79; F. David Farnell, “Fallible New Testament Prophecy/Prophets? A Critique of Wayne Grudem’s Hypothesis,” *TMSJ* 2 (Fall 1991): 157–81.

in Acts 2, and finally (3) that we should expect the practice to continue and even expand in the life of the church as we approach the eschaton. Many, in fact, seem to regard the eschatological argument for continuationism as unassailable.²⁵ The following syllogism, crafted by Douglas Moo with reference to healing, has direct implications for the issue of tongues:

- A: Where the kingdom of God is present, the healing of diseases is present.
- B: The kingdom of God is present in and through the church in our day.
- C: Therefore the healing of diseases must be present in and through the church today.²⁶

Moo goes on to qualify the conclusion to say that “the presence of the reign of God in and through the church makes miracles of healing *possible*, but not *necessary*,” noting that the latter understanding smacks of an “over-realized eschatology” that sees the kingdom present in all of its fullness. Moo concludes that “biblical balance is best preserved if Christians remain open to the exercise of miraculous healings but do not insist on them.”²⁷

Looking objectively at this syllogism from a traditional dispensational vantage, I find the logic impeccable. And it is not surprising that progressive dispensationalists have begun to cautiously embrace more open views on tongues—there is little in their system to prevent this.²⁸ Only a traditional dispensational scheme, which holds to a postponed kingdom, can argue decisively for cessation.²⁹ Not all, of course, are thus inclined. Robert Saucy (a progressive dispensationalist), for instance, rejects the inaugurated eschatology argument for tongues, arguing that while the church enjoys some of the spiritual/redemptive benefits of kingdom life, the full manifestation of the physical/empowering benefits of kingdom life remain future.³⁰ Richard B. Gaffin (a non-dispensationalist) argues that tongues belong properly to redemptive history and not church history, noting that the “waiting” church does not have all of the kingdom benefits promised to the eschatological community of the redeemed.³¹ And while these attempts to maintain a cessationist position are noteworthy, they seem to reflect a bit of arbitrariness in application that

²⁵See, e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 822–26; Douglas A. Oss, “The Pentecostal/ Charismatic View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* 266–73; Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: Discovering How God Speaks and Heals Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 224–25; Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), p. 255; etc.

²⁶Douglas J. Moo, “Divine Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel,” *Trinity Journal* 9 (Fall 1988): 197.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 197–98.

²⁸See, e.g., Ryrie's prediction of this in his *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), p. 177; also Bruce A. Baker, “Progressive Dispensationalism & Cessationism: Why They Are Incompatible,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 8 (Spring 2004): 55–88.

²⁹Moo makes this very point in his article, albeit in a somewhat backhanded way. He notes that [traditional] dispensationalists “should not necessarily expect divine healing in our day because the kingdom is not, in fact present.” Moo dismisses this view, however, as losing ground to the evangelical consensus that the kingdom has been inaugurated, concluding, “The kingdom is indeed present in our day, and we should expect to see signs of that kingdom” (Moo, “Divine Healing,” p. 197).

³⁰“An Open but Cautious Response to Douglas A. Oss,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* pp. 302–4.

³¹“A Cessationist Response to Douglas A. Oss,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* pp. 285ff.

is difficult to maintain. I am convinced that by far the most ironclad defense of cessationism lies in the hands of the traditional dispensationalist who sees tongues as expressions, in the words of Hebrews 6:5, powers of the *age to come*.

Time does not permit us to craft a fully-orbed defense of the traditional dispensational view of the kingdom in the brief time we have together this morning.³² But it behooves us to at least look into the question of the use of Joel 2 in Acts 2. As we have noted above, Luke appears to use fulfillment terminology from a clearly eschatological passage (“this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel”—Acts 2:16, KJV) to describe the outbreak of tongues at Pentecost. But as we compare the texts, we discover that few if any of the details of Joel’s prophecy are fulfilled in Acts: (1) the events in Acts do *not* take place “after” the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord”; (2) the Spirit is *not* poured out on all mankind; (3) dreams and visions do not occur, and it is doubtful that prophecy occurred in Acts 2; (4) with the possible exception of fire, the events of Joel 2:30–31 (blood, fire, columns of smoke, and the concealment of the great luminaries) do not occur. We add to this that the one phenomenon in question—tongues—is ironically *not* predicted in Joel.³³ As such, we have a great hermeneutical conundrum on our hands. Several options emerge:

- Some, particularly of the more covenantal persuasion suggest that Peter has simply recast Joel’s prophecy and that the prophecy was fulfilled in its entirety at Pentecost.³⁴
- Some suggest that Peter employed a combination of *pešer* techniques and “advance typology” to supply “eschatological application to a present situation” by the “use of text alteration or wordplay by a divinely inspired figure.”³⁵
- Some suggest that Peter sees this prophecy as having an extended fulfillment or multiple fulfillments such that the fulfillment has begun, but awaits completion.³⁶
- Some suggest that Peter was simply speaking analogically, that is, suggesting a point of similarity between the events predicted in Joel 2 and the events occurring in Acts 2—viz., the supernatural outpouring of pneumatological powers. In this case there is no

³²For this I recommend Alva J. McClain’s *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1959). While McClain’s view of the kingdom differs (sometimes significantly) from the understanding that emerged from the Dallas school of theology (e.g., titles by Chafer, Walvoord, and Pentecost), they resonate together in placing the Messianic kingdom in the future. The mystery “form” of the kingdom advocated by the latter group is not to be confused with the already/not yet understanding of the progressive dispensationalist view of the Messianic kingdom.

³³In Roy Beacham’s excellent summary of this passage, he concludes sagely the “time, substance, and referents” of the fulfillment are all wrong—nothing matches! (“The Analogical Use of Joel 2:28–32 in Acts 2:15–21: A Literal Approach,” in *The Holy Spirit: Bible Faculty Leadership Summit* [Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998], pp. 109–110).

³⁴E.g., John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), p. 73.

³⁵Daniel J. Treier, “The Fulfillment of Joel 2:28–32: A Multiple Lens Approach,” *JETS* 40 (March 1997): 18.

³⁶E.g., Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), pp. 112ff; Walter C. Kaiser, *Back to the Future: Hints for Interpreting Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), p. 43.

fulfillment at all, only a point of similarity.³⁷

I am convinced that fidelity to the plain, unalterable, and infallible text of the OT makes the first two options not only implausible, but incompatible with inerrancy. The third *might* be plausible if only there was some piece of the Joel prophecy actually fulfilled in Acts 2. In view of the fact that this is not the case, I am convinced that the analogical understanding of Peter's language is to be preferred.³⁸ In this case, the exercise of tongues in Acts 2 is not to be associated with the *arrival* of the kingdom, but is, instead, a kingdom *marker*, that is, a signal of a shift in God's kingdom program that heretofore had been a mystery. As such, tongues in Acts functioned in the absence of the completed Word of God to confirm, specifically (but not exclusively) to the Jews, the viability of the dramatic change in how a believer might be rightly related to God (e.g., the dissolution of sacrifices, the setting aside of the Law, the unfolding of God's new dispensational vehicle, the church, and the unlikely inclusion of Gentiles in that body). All these changes, which a Jew would naturally view with a critical, even skeptical eye, merited proof from God that they were, indeed, legitimate changes—i.e., that a shift in God's Kingdom program had truly occurred. This proof came, very often, in the form of glossolalia.

5. *The Argument from the Biblical Function of the Tongues as Edifying the Church*

The following is not so much an argument against tongues *per se*, but a collection of snipes at the practice of tongues in the church today. In short, they argue collectively that even if speaking in tongues is to be allowed in the church today, most of what passes for glossolalia today does not fit the biblical criteria for tongues as set down in 1 Corinthians 12–14. The following expressions of “tongues” in the church today fail because they do not fulfill the primary function of spiritual gifts—the edification of the church.

- Tongues as unintelligible, ecstatic utterances. That ecstatic utterances were present in several ancient religions is a fact well attested in the literature. BDAG suggests that the term γλῶσσα may be used to describe such utterances, but gives few extra-biblical references in support of this meaning.³⁹ Thomas R. Edgar has done significant research on the term and has concluded that these extrabiblical references cited in BDAG are dubious in nature. Instead, ancient writers preferred the term γλῶσσα for antiquated and foreign utterances, but almost always used alternate terms for ecstatic utterances.⁴⁰

Ultimately, however, it is NT usage that is determinative. And in the NT all clear instances of γλῶσσα (which in accord to the basic principle of the analogy of Scripture inform the unclear instances) unequivocally reference known languages. In Acts 2, the definitive event to which all other glossolalia in Acts points (see, e.g., Acts 10:46 cf.

³⁷See, e.g., Beacham, “Use of Joel 2:28–32 in Acts 2:15–21”; Thomas D. Ice, “Dispensational Hermeneutics,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 41.

³⁸For a helpful hermeneutical discussion of this phenomenon, complete with biblical examples, see Charles H. Dyer, “Biblical Meaning of ‘Fulfillment,’” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 57–69.

³⁹BDAG, s.v. “γλῶσσα,” pp. 201–2.

⁴⁰*Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, pp. 120–48.

11:15), the tongues were clearly human languages, because they were heard and understood by various foreigners. Uses of the term in 1 Corinthians 14:21, Revelation 5:9, and Revelation 7:9 also represent undisputed references to people speaking various languages. Likewise the call for interpretation in 1 Corinthians 14:13, 26–28 argues for objective, propositional languages that are subject to normal translation procedures. Finally, as if in anticipation of the modern practice of tongues, Paul announces clearly in 1 Corinthians 14:10 that every valid instance of tongues contains intrinsic, propositional meaning—a meaning that must in every case be divulged if it is to be spoken in the church.

Reference to tongues known only to God (1 Cor 14:2) does not present a challenge to this understanding—in context this is not a “divine” language that is *untranslatable*, but an ordinary language that is *untranslated*. And even the strange reference to the tongues of angels (1 Cor 13:1) present little threat. It is possible that Paul is acknowledging here a language unique to angels, but it is more likely that he was using hyperbole to reference a hypothetical claim that exceeded even the claims of the Corinthians.⁴¹ At any rate, such a practice would not be unintelligible gibberish, but something capable of careful translation in the church—or else it is forbidden.

- Tongues practiced without an interpreter. In keeping with the foregoing, Paul is insistent that tongues must be practiced sparingly, one at a time, and only with an interpreter (esp. 1 Cor 14:26–28). His reasoning is clear—anything else cannot edify because it creates chaos and bewilderment in the meeting of God’s church (14:23, 33). And it is here that we find the guiding thread for the whole of Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 14. Any practice that takes place in the house of God must edify the *assembly* or else it must be eliminated (vv. 4, 5, 12, 17, 19, 26). Clearly all modern-day expressions of tongues that do not include orderliness, translation, and careful explanation in the assembly are categorically unbiblical.
- Tongues foisted upon the whole congregation. It has been mentioned that most conservative expressions of tongues no longer demand tongues of all believers without exception. Nonetheless, there remain many expressions of modern-day tongue-speaking that demand the practice of all believers as necessary expressions of saving faith or of Spirit baptism. Against these Paul clearly affirms that “all do not speak with tongues” (1 Cor 12:30).
- Tongues practiced privately. In the midst of his diatribe against the non-edifying nature of untranslated tongues, Paul on several occasions suggests that tongues that are of no use in the assembly may yet edify the speaker (14:4, 14, 28) and communicate with God himself (14:2, 14). These curious comments have caused many continuationists to argue for a private, devotional use of tongues outside of the assembly—one that is not edifying to the body, but edifying nonetheless to the individual. However, this understanding misses the force of Paul’s argument.

Paul’s argument, as we have seen, is that the function of tongues in the church, like all

⁴¹So Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*, p. 68.

gifts, is the *mutual* advancement and edification of the body, and not the advancement of self. Taken this way, Paul's comment that non-interpreted tongues edify only the speaker (v. 4) emerges not as a virtue, but as a vice: it is an instance of self-aggrandizement that meets with Paul's disapproval and should be eschewed.⁴²

Likewise, Paul's directive to speak to oneself and to God (14:2, 28) is not to be construed as a positive exhortation. Again, Paul's concern is the mutual edification of the body, which is not furthered by untranslated tongues. He thus instructs people who are insistent on exercising their "gift" to keep it to themselves or else go somewhere where they won't bother the assembly.⁴³ There they can freely talk to themselves (a practice that involves no real communication and profits no one) or talk to God (who ostensibly gave them this secret message in a foreign tongue and thus cannot possibly derive any pleasure from its mindless repetition in his ears).

In summary, even if we concede, for sake of argument only, that the practice of tongue-speaking might have a valid expression in the church, virtually all of what passes as tongue-speaking in the church at large simply does not qualify.

Conclusion

While the case for cessationism, I believe has been objectively made for decades, the continually changing landscape of evangelical, dispensational, and even fundamentalist theology is such that the case needs to be made again and again to meet new challenges and emphases in the world of tongue-speaking. And while there is a significant trend in conservative evangelicalism to dismiss differences on this issue as non-essential in nature, the foregoing has attempted to stress that this issue is one with first-order doctrinal implications. May God give us grace to earnestly contend for cessationism as integral to "the faith" and worthy of a most careful defense.

⁴²Ibid., p. 89; also Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, pp. 170–71. For a similar negative usage of οἰκοδομέω see 1 Cor 8:10.

⁴³Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*, pp. 176–77.