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## Is the Gift of Tongues for Today?

*Editor's note: This is essentially the same as the presentation given at the National Association of Free Will Baptists, 2009, sponsored by the Commission for Theological Integrity. The Commission asked that it be included in this issue of Integrity.*

### INTRODUCTION

The issue of tongues<sup>1</sup> is apparently with us again. Christians who do not participate in the phenomenon faced it twice in the twentieth century. Both times it was known as Pentecostalism: the view that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is evidenced by speaking in tongues.

To set a convenient date, we may trace the *first* wave to about 1901 when this phenomenon broke out among a group led by Charles Parham in Kansas City.<sup>2</sup> During the years that followed, the Pentecostals formed many groups, ranging from “Sister Aimee” Kennedy Semple McPherson’s International Church of the Four-Square Gospel to the Assemblies of God. For about fifty years this movement mostly stayed within the confines of those denominations.

It became necessary, during that period, to distinguish between *Holiness* and *Pentecostal* theology, a distinction that is still useful. The former promotes sanctification as “a second definite work of grace”—to use the traditional terminology. The latter promotes the baptism of the Holy Spirit as evidenced by speaking in tongues. Some denominations, like the Nazarenes and Wesleyan Methodists, are Holiness in doctrine but not Pentecostal. Some, like the Assemblies, are Pentecostal but not Holiness. A number of groups, like many of the Church of God denominations or the Pentecostal Holiness Church, are both. At the practical level, however, speaking in tongues and “second blessing” theology are often linked.

For convenience, again, we may view circa 1960 as the beginning of the *second* wave, when Pentecostalism burst forth from its traditional boundaries and washed over into churches of almost every stripe. Whether Roman Catholic, mainline liberal Protestant, or conservative evangelical, people from churches of many different backgrounds experienced the

1. When I say “tongues” in this article, that stands for “the gift of tongues” or “speaking in tongues” and is for my convenience.

2. Similar phenomena on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California, in 1906 are equally regarded.

baptism and the gift. Even secular newspapers carried reports of the phenomena. Groups that practiced fellowship across denominational lines, like the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, flourished. Thousands flocked to annual conferences like those sponsored by Pentecostal Catholics at Notre Dame. Periodicals were birthed and books were published to promote and maintain the fervor. The issue came up for discussion—usually tense—in almost every denominational organization. The term *charismatic*—from the Greek word for gifts—became a popular synonym for Pentecostal, although these days we are inclined to use it more broadly to refer to anyone who thinks that the “miraculous” gifts of the Spirit are still given and especially for those outside the traditional Pentecostal churches. In this sense the “charismatic renewal” took on a powerfully ecumenical flavor.<sup>3</sup>

Those who were not around in the sixties can hardly imagine what it was like. The non-Pentecostal church could not avoid responding to the clamor. From many quarters (including our own<sup>4</sup>) came Biblical treatments aimed at showing why we do not think God intended the gift of tongues for the church of today. By and large, these responses sounded some common themes. I summarize the major points here and will return to the most important ones below.

- We argued that the original Pentecost in Acts 2 represented a turning-point in salvation history that was not to be repeated and that every believer is “baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ” at conversion (1 Cor. 12:13).
- Consequently, we argued that Christians do not need “the baptism of the Spirit” as a “second blessing.”
- We argued that the tongues in Acts 2 were human languages, as is unambiguous in the passage itself. By implication, this meant that the tongues in 1 Corinthians were also human languages.

3. For this reason the Commission on Theological Liberalism (now the Commission for Theological Integrity) of the NAFWB on two occasions asked me to make presentations during the National about the relationship between the charismatics and ecumenism. These were ultimately published as booklets by the Commission as *The Charismatics and the Ecumenical Movement* (about 1974) and *The Charismatics, the New Ecumenicals* (probably 1979).

4. See my *What the Bible Says about Tongues* (Nashville: Randall House, 1973, reprinted from an earlier, self-published edition). See also Harrold Harrison and Leroy Forlines, *The Charismatic Movement: A Survey of Its Development and Doctrine* (Nashville: The Commission for Theological Integrity of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, 1989). For a practical approach to spiritual gifts, see my *The Gifts of the Spirit: Christian Service Reconsidered* (Nashville: Randall House, 1980).

- We made the case that, in light of the New Testament teaching, the purpose of the “sign gifts” (those requiring miraculous intervention) implied that they were not meant to be permanent in the life of the Christian church.
- We showed, from 1 Corinthians 12, that tongues were never intended as a gift for all.

In some ways, at least, our arguments were effective. But if we thought we had put away the issue of tongues for good, we were premature. Like the proverbial bad penny, it has come around again. My purpose in this presentation is to deal with the form in which tongues have now made another appearance and to discuss whether tongues in this form are for Christians today.<sup>5</sup>

### 1. THE NEW TONGUES MOVEMENT

A *third* wave of the charismatic movement is now upon us, as well as a “mildly charismatic” form espoused by some respected, Evangelical thinkers. I will summarize both forms.

1.1. We can date the Third Wave,<sup>6</sup> proper, to the late 1970s, especially to John Wimber. In 1978 he established a church in Yorba Linda, California, the rapid growth of which he attributed to “power evangelism.” From 1982 to 1985 he taught a course at Fuller Theological Seminary called “The Miraculous and Church Growth.” As his following developed, the churches took the name “Vineyard Churches,” and the title “Signs and Wonders Movement” came to be applied to the whole. In brief, the key elements of this movement are as follows:

- The New Testament church is in an age when the kingdom of God has already broken into history, although that kingdom will be more fully manifested in its final form at the end of the age.
- Then Christians are on a war footing, confronting Satan’s kingdom. The two sides are in a power struggle.
- In that light, the church needs displays of supernatural power—“signs and wonders”—to wield effectively the weapons of this warfare.
- Indeed, these are *necessary* for effective evangelism.

5. For a contemporary defense of Pentecostalism (more or less classic), see Douglas A. Oss, “A Pentecostal/Charismatic View,” in Wayne Grudem, ed., *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 239-283, and in his responses throughout the volume.

6. I will capitalize “Third Wave” to identify the more or less specific movement defined here.

- They include such things as exorcisms of demons, revelations and prophecies, healing of the sick, and speaking or praying in tongues.<sup>7</sup>
- These phenomena, however (and here the Vineyard churches break with traditional Pentecostalism), are *not* evidences of baptism in the Spirit and are *not* to be expected for every believer.

I will rely primarily on Sam Storms for the Third Wave teaching, especially on the subject of tongues.<sup>8</sup>

1.2. Closely related are some Evangelical theologians who have undertaken to defend the idea that all of the spiritual gifts listed in the New Testament, including especially those in 1 Corinthians 12-14 (with the exception of apostleship), are still given to the church. Technically, these thinkers are not part of the historic charismatic tradition and are also to be distinguished in some ways from the Third Wave. The two most well-known names for this perspective are Wayne Grudem, who argues for prophecy and for the revelation necessary to that gift,<sup>9</sup> and Donald Carson, who argues for the continuation of the gift of tongues.<sup>10</sup>

This “mildly charismatic” view, as I call it for convenience, is my primary focus in this presentation—as requested by the Commission. Even so, some of the issues are the same as for Third Wave charismatics, and some are the same as those we dealt with in confronting traditional Pentecostalism. The difference between Carson and Storms on tongues, in particular, is more a matter of emphasis. Storms is *enthusiastic* about the gift, promoting its use, eager for believers to receive the benefit of this “precious gift.”<sup>11</sup> Carson, on the other hand, is more subdued. He appears

7. The emphasis on tongues varies somewhat among those in the Third Wave.

8. See Sam (C. Samuel) Storms, *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Gifts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2002), and his “A Third Wave View,” in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*. I have depended primarily on the first of these two. Storms represents the charismatic Calvinist movement, which distances him from traditional Pentecostalism. See also D. A. Carson, “The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament,” *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?*, ed. Michael Scott Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 90-91. Two (of many) books produced in behalf of Vineyard theology are John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), and by the same authors and publisher, *Power Healing* (1987). See also Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), which many of the Third Wave regard as especially important.

9. Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988, 2000), which grew out of his *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982). All references to his *Gift of Prophecy* are to the 2000 edition.

10. D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

11. Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 140. Some Third Wave pastors do not emphasize tongues as much as he.

to downplay the gift and certainly prefers that it be exercised in private devotion.

1.3. To help the reader follow the rest of this presentation, I summarize (at some risk of oversimplification) the important ingredients of the Carson-Grudem view.

- Both tongues and prophecy in 1 Corinthians, and in the church today, are in important respects different from their earlier appearances in the Bible. New Testament prophecy is not like Old Testament prophecy. The tongues at Corinth were different from those in Acts 2.
- Both gifts are therefore less spectacular than usually thought. Prophecy is “speaking merely human words to report something God brings to mind.”<sup>12</sup> Tongues are not human languages but a language for prayer, preferably private prayer.
- Neither gift is required for all Christians, although they are valuable and might be experienced by any believer. Such “gifts of the Spirit” are as much events as endowments to be possessed by persons.
- Neither gift signifies advanced spirituality, but prophecy in the public assembly is a sign of God’s blessing and tongues enhance one’s prayer life.

All of these matters will arise in the discussion to follow.

1.4. In some ways this development is gratifying to those of us who were assaulted by the second wave of Pentecostalism. It means that many of the arguments we made have won acceptance, at least with the Third Wave and the mildly charismatic Evangelicals. They agree with us that the tongues in Acts 2 were human languages—and that today’s charismatics are *not* speaking human languages.<sup>13</sup> They agree that speaking in tongues is *not* the evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and that Acts 2 does not record a kind of “Spirit baptism” that every Christian needs to experience subsequent to conversion. Carson, for example, holds that Pentecost was a “climactic salvation-historical event,” tied to a “redemptive-historical appointment” that is not repeatable.<sup>14</sup> They agree that tongues are not for every believer and need not be used in public at all.

We turn our attention, now, to the issues.

12. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, table of contents.

13. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 138; also Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 141.

14. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 140.

## 2. CESSATIONISM VERSUS CONTINUATIONISM

What was always at the heart of our differences with charismatics, whatever else they teach, remains the same: namely, the question whether all the gifts of the Spirit were intended by God to continue throughout the history of the church into the present age.

There are four places in the New Testament where the gifts of the Spirit are listed: two in 1 Corinthians 12 (vv. 8-10 and 28), one in Romans 12:6-8, and one in Ephesians 4:11. (The reference in 1 Peter 4:10-11 might be added, although it does not so much list various gifts as divide them into two categories: service gifts and gifts of speaking.) Some of these gifts required a miraculous, divine intervention. These included—among others, perhaps—prophetic utterance, working miracles, healing, and speaking or translating a language that one did not know. These have often been called “sign gifts,” emphasizing their effectiveness as direct manifestations of the power of God intended to “signify” His confirmation of the person or message involved.<sup>15</sup>

The charismatic position is that all of these were intended to be a part of church life permanently. We call this a *continuationist* view.<sup>16</sup> The non-charismatic position is that the Lord meant for the sign gifts, at least, to be temporary. This is a *cessationist* view, sometimes referred to as (although not necessarily agreeing in every detail with) the Warfield position.<sup>17</sup>

2.1. We cessationists believe that the New Testament, although it does not deal *directly* with the question of the duration of the sign gifts, appears to define their role in such a way as to imply that they were intended to be temporary, specifically for the apostolic age. Several lines of New Testament evidence form the basis for this view.

An attentive reading of Acts, especially the first several chapters, is interesting for its emphasis on the works of the *apostles*. The following are noteworthy.

- 2:43: “Many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.” Chapter three provides a specific example.

15. For a helpful treatment of miracles as signs, see Harrison and Forlines, *Charismatic Movement*, 19-25.

16. Carson and Grudem do not think that the gift of apostleship continues.

17. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (London: Banner of Truth, 1972, reprinted from 1918). Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “A Cessationist View,” in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, 25-64 (and in responses throughout the volume) provides a helpful updating of the cessationist view and is more exegetical than Warfield, whose treatment was primarily historical.

- 4:33: “With great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” Chapter five provides a specific example.
- 5:12: “And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people.” The following verses provide a specific example.

This has all the appearance of a deliberate pattern, one that links the signs and wonders with the ministry of the apostles. This does not mean, of course, that absolutely no one else performed such miraculous works. Both Stephen (Acts 6:8) and Philip (Acts 8:6, 13) were instruments of such power, but it seems likely that their gift came at the hands of the apostles (Acts 6:6).<sup>18</sup>

This understanding is reinforced in 2 Corinthians 12:12. Paul was also a true apostle, even if “born out of due time” (1 Cor. 15:8), who often had to defend his standing. Here he claims (v. 11) to be nothing behind the very chief-most apostles and fortifies the claim by saying, “Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.” Surely his identification of these supernatural works as “the signs of an apostle” is significant.

Finally, consider Hebrews 2:3-4. The writer speaks of the “great salvation” that was at first spoken by the Lord Jesus Himself. It was then spoken by “them that heard him”—the apostolic generation, apparently. Finally, as they ministered what they had seen and heard in the flesh to “us”—the next generation of hearers in the chain—their ministry was confirmed by the witness God gave in “signs and wonders and different miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit.” Again we have the implication, then, that there was a deliberate connection between the sign gifts and the ministry of the apostles.

This last passage implies the reason for this. The written New Testament, as a publishing of the apostolic faith,<sup>19</sup> was not yet available—at least not in completion. Confirmation of the truth the apostles proclaimed and wrote was needed, and that took the form of “the signs of an apostle”: supernatural signs and wonders, in other words. Once the Canon was completed and the apostolic generation had passed off the scene, we believe, the Lord did not purpose to give those gifts indefinitely. Signs and wonders in the Bible are especially linked to critical moments in salvation history. Once those critical moments have passed, the signs and wonders tend to fade away.

18. Gaffin, “Cessationist View,” 39, speaks of this as functioning under an “apostolic umbrella.”

19. Carson speaks of this often (and aptly) as “the apostolic deposit.”

This certainly seems to include the gift of prophecy, which the church has traditionally understood to mean supernaturally receiving and passing along a divine revelation. Direct revelation from God we have traditionally viewed as complete in the New Testament, making that gift no longer needed. (Since interpreted tongues are the “functional equivalent” of prophecy, as Storms acknowledges,<sup>20</sup> they include divine revelation and are likewise no longer needed.)

Observations from practical experience tend to support this line of Biblical evidence. When we face the claims of the “healers,” for example, we cannot help noticing that they die too, and of the very same diseases and at the very same ages as all the rest of us— putting in serious doubt both their works and their claim that God does not will for any believer to be sick. We cannot bring ourselves to believe that the Genesis curse on the created order—which is the source of physical illness—has in some way been lifted from Christians. To their credit, the Third Wave charismatics have dropped most of those claims, although they continue to emphasize healing in their services. For us, the healing of the sick now apparently falls more into the pattern of James 5:14-16 than as a gift possessed by healers to work miracles.<sup>21</sup>

In the same light, having understood the tongues in Acts 2 to be human languages, we notice that the charismatics are certainly *not* speaking human languages—as Carson and Grudem and many in the Third Wave now acknowledge. Since we see no reason to view the tongues in 1 Corinthians any differently, this supports the view that this gift too, like the other miraculous gifts, has ceased. (We believe that a correct understanding of 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 adds further support, as will be seen in the exegetical survey of 1 Corinthians 12-14 to follow.)

I should add that cessationism does *not* mean that God no longer works supernaturally in our midst. He most certainly heals, for example—in answer to the prayerful outcry of His children and in accord with His will for any given situation. But the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14 were endowments possessed by *persons* (as 12:8-11, 28-30 make clear), not mere occasional events. Cessationists teach that *as a gift to a person to be a healer* that gift has ceased, but God has not ceased sharing with us the gracious gift of His Spirit and power in healing *events*. Furthermore, cessationism applies only to the specific “sign gifts” included in the lists, not to “gifts

20. Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 124.

21. As Robert L. Saucy, “Open but Cautious,” in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, 122, observes, the passage “says nothing about any of them having the gift of healing.”



of grace” used in the broader sense—a sense that would even include salvation.

2.2. Against this line of reasoning the continuationists insist that all the gifts of the Spirit (except apostleship) continue. Without going into great detail, I observe that there are two main lines of reasoning with which they support this view. The first is more or less a simple affirmation, in light of 1 Corinthians 12-14 as inspired Scripture. The point is this. The lists there include the sign gifts. Chapter 14 treats them as really functioning at Corinth. The chapter also describes how both tongues and prophecy are to be correctly used. These chapters are as much for the church today as any other Scripture. Therefore the gifts are still valid.

This particular approach assumes the position being argued: namely, that references to the practice of tongues in the New Testament proves that the gift was permanent. That is, however, the question. Furthermore, this approach ignores other cases in the New Testament where a particular practice of the time is no longer applicable and yet had to be treated in the Bible while it existed. The “holy kiss” practiced as a form of greeting in that culture serves as a good example. In the same way, the discussion of prophecy and tongues provides important principles for life in the church even though those gifts are no longer given.

The gifts of prophecy and tongues were certainly being given when 1 Corinthians was written by the apostle Paul. No one disputes that. We acknowledge, of course, that nothing is said there to indicate that they would cease. But one would hardly expect that to be said when they were in effect. If Paul’s treatment of them does not prove they were meant to be temporary, neither does it prove they were meant to be permanent.

The other main approach used by continuationists is to show that 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 does *not* prove that tongues would cease during the present age. This is no doubt an important part of their argument, for the simple reason that many cessationists have interpreted the words of verse 8 (“tongues ... shall cease”) to mean cease early in the present age.<sup>22</sup>

Both Carson and Grudem proceed along the following lines. The cessation of tongues (v. 8) will occur when “that which is perfect” (v. 10) comes. At present the gifts of prophecy (directly stated) and tongues (clearly implied) represent what is partial (v. 9), to be done away with

22. For a good example of this approach by a cessationist, see Robert L. Reymond, *What about Continuing Revelations and Miracles in the Presbyterian Church Today?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), who argues that “that which is perfect” refers to the completed revelatory process that resulted in the finished Canon. The answer of Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 200-204, relies on denying the idea that New Testament prophecy is “Scripture-quality revelation.”

when perfection comes. This will take place at the coming of Christ (the *parousia*) at the end of this age.<sup>23</sup>

I will not attempt to develop their view of this passage further, for the simple reason that I am in fundamental agreement with them. Carson may think—I am not sure—that *all* cessationists believe that these verses point to that cessation. If so, he is wrong. Grudem is aware that at least one cessationist agrees that 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 does not foretell the cessation of tongues and prophecy during the present age.<sup>24</sup> At any rate, I have never used that passage in defense of the cessation of the sign gifts. Consequently, his exegetical conclusion, that the passage does *not* prove cessation, has no effect on my position. I insisted, in my commentary, that “the point about these three gifts of the Spirit is that they represent the imperfect and partial work of the Spirit in us in the present age. ... All such gifts are temporary, destined to be replaced by something far better.”<sup>25</sup>

The point to be made, here, is simply this. Just as this passage does *not* tell that any of the gifts were intended to cease during the present age, *neither does it tell that they were meant to continue throughout the age*. It is one thing to show that the verses do not prove cessation. It is quite another to show that they require continuation. Assuredly, the perfection of the age to come will replace all our present imperfections and partial experience of the things of God. At that point *everything* characteristic of our present incompleteness will be done away, including our imperfect worship, our preaching and teaching, our ministering or showing of mercy. Paul’s point is that *all* of the gifts will pass away then. That falls very short of demonstrating that *some* of the gifts, whose purpose was temporary, did not pass away even earlier. Indeed, Carson and Grudem think that apostleship has passed from the scene, so the passage allows, in their view, for the cessation of at least one of the gifts long before the second coming.<sup>26</sup>

23. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 69-72. For the same approach see Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 194-99.

24. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 199-200, answering Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 109-110. In Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, both Gaffin (55-56) and Saucy (123) affirm that 1 Cor. 13:8 speaks neither of the continuation nor of the cessation of any specific gifts.

25. Robert E. Picirilli, *1, 2 Corinthians* (RHBC; Nashville: Randall House, 1987), 191.

26. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 199-200, answers Gaffin’s similar protest; I do not think his answer is satisfactory. Some continuationists (like Sam Storms, “A Third Wave Response to Robert L. Saucy,” in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, 156-159), argue that apostleship was *not* one of the spiritual gifts, but in light of 1 Cor. 12:28 and Eph. 4:11, that view will hardly stand exegetical scrutiny.

And if there are no more apostles, then the apostolic era has passed and *we are in a different era.*<sup>27</sup>

Carson certainly seems to understand the force of what I have outlined, above, about the linking of the sign gifts with the apostles. Indeed, he presents the case that “signs and wonders,” in Biblical terminology, are linked to “the two major events of redemptive history, namely, the Exodus and the coming of Jesus Messiah” and that “the activity of the apostles is part and parcel of the Christ-revelation.”<sup>28</sup> He uses the very same references that I have used, and in the very same way! In the end, however, he insists that this “cannot be made to support the conclusion that miraculous signs and wonders have ceased altogether.”<sup>29</sup>

His reason for this is that the passages do not specifically declare that the signs and wonders would cease, nor does any other passage in the New Testament. In other words, there is no *direct* statement in the Bible that God intended these sign gifts to be limited to the apostolic age. He is right in that, of course, but I think he misunderstands the claim of those of us who take this stance.<sup>30</sup> We are *not* saying that any passage spells out that some of the gifts were temporary. As I said already, that would hardly be expected during the period when they were being given. What we *are* saying is that the positive statements the New Testament makes, to *define the nature and purpose of the sign gifts*, are such that they are most coherently understood as meant for confirmation of the ministry of those who were laying down the apostolic faith. It follows from that, then, that gifts given for that purpose would be temporary.

### 3. AN EXEGETICAL TREATMENT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 12-14

As always, the decisive issue is what the Bible has to say, and these three chapters are at the heart of the differences of opinion. We need, therefore, to work our way through the broader context of chapters 12-14.

27. Gaffin, in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, 45-48, presses this point well. Saucy, “An Open but Cautious View,” in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, 102, though he is open to the appearance of sign gifts today, urges that “the disappearance of apostles in the church thus argues rather clearly that not all has remained the same in the church with regard to miraculous gifts.”

28. Carson, *Power Religion*, 101-102.

29. *Ibid.*

30. It is precisely because the cessationist argument is *indirect* that my last chapter in *What the Bible Says about Tongues* is titled “What If I’m Wrong?” For this I received some criticism from my cessationist friends, who thought I was waffling. My point, however, was that even if the indirect argument for cessationism is not finally convincing to anyone else, it is *still* true that the Pentecostal view is Biblically wrong, both in theory and in practice.

### Chapter 12

Paul begins by making a case that the gifts of the Spirit are from the same triune God (vv. 4-6) and that they are given so that all the members of the church (like parts of the human body) can contribute to the proper functioning of the whole (vv. 12-30), with each one's contribution essential. Consequently, not all members have the same gifts (including the gift of tongues!). The answers to the questions in vv. 29, 30 are unambiguously negative.

### 12:31 and Chapter 13

At this point Paul introduces a new idea: "Covet earnestly the best gifts," meaning that some gifts make a more important contribution to the life of the church than others, and that his readers should seek those. Before expounding on that, however, he wishes to show them a "more excellent way." That is the way of love, as developed in chapter 13. Only when one exercises spiritual gifts in love will they amount to anything. Only the person under the domination of love will be able to appreciate the greater worth of some of the gifts, to be discussed in chapter 14.

### Chapter 14

After the "poem to love" in chapter 13, then, Paul returns to the idea that some gifts are "best" and to be sought. He illustrates this, at great length, by comparing tongues with prophecy (at a time when both were still being given, of course). This leads to *the only New Testament commentary on the value of tongues* (especially vv. 1-22). If one wishes to be Biblical—and who of us does not?—then it is absolutely essential to evaluate the gift of tongues according to this passage.

When we do that, the clear principle emerges, twice: "Forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church" (v.12). "Let all things be done unto edifying" (v. 26). This appeal stands like two bookends around a shelf of books, and it is the basis for saying that some gifts are best. The best gifts are those that are more useful for edifying the church. One needs only to count the instances of the verb *edify* and noun *edification*—seven times—to get the point.

In that light—and I think anyone who reads this section objectively must acknowledge this—speaking in tongues is not especially helpful for the edifying of the church, not nearly so much as the gift of prophecy. Every time edification is mentioned, tongues come up short!

Now this may need qualification: Storms (and probably Carson) would not appreciate the way I have expressed this. He would say that the negative comparison applies *only* to *uninterpreted* tongues and that

*interpreted* tongues have the same value as prophecy.<sup>31</sup> It is true that *once*, after a negative evaluation of tongues, Paul adds “except he interpret” (14:5), but Paul’s lengthy comparison seems generally to be aimed at the gift, as such, rather than only when abused by being uninterpreted. Had Paul meant to evaluate only uninterpreted tongues, he could easily have said so. I do not think that any reader of the chapter will get the idea that tongues, even when interpreted, are as valuable in Paul’s eyes as prophecy.

#### 14:1-6

In these verses, then, the point—to read it in the best possible light—is that speaking in tongues is only understood by God, not human beings, and does not, like prophecy, edify the church. The best that can be said of this gift is that it edifies oneself, and in light of the rest of the passage one can only wonder if Paul views that as *selfish*. That is probably too strong, but Carson’s observation apparently sounds just the right note: “The tongues-speaker may be edifying himself (14:4), but that is too small a horizon for those who have meditated on 1 Corinthians 13.”<sup>32</sup> Regardless, for edification of the church, prophecy is superior to tongues.

#### 14:7-13

Now Paul uses four analogies to illustrate his point. Speaking in tongues is (a) like playing musical instruments without giving clear and different notes (v. 7), (b) like a bugler who gives an unrecognizable call to the troops (v. 8), (c) like a person speaking “into the air” (v. 9), or (d) like the talk of an uncivilized barbarian (v. 11).<sup>33</sup> At the very least, these are not flattering comparisons!

This brings Paul to his first statement of the principle of edification in verse 12. And so if one is to uphold that principle and still speak in tongues he can only do so by receiving also the gift of translating what he said (v. 13).

#### 14:14-17

At this point Paul brings up various exercises that go on in the public assembly where the use of tongues might be involved. These are prayers (vv. 14-15a), songs (v. 15b), and words of praise (“bless” in v. 16, “give

31. Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 124.

32. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 102.

33. This illustration is especially apt, given that the Greeks coined the word *barbarian* because the languages of other peoples (whom they looked down on as uncivilized) sounded like so much *bar-bar-bar* to them.

thanks" in vv. 16, 17). In each case he prefers doing so when the "understanding" is fruitfully involved over doing so when only the "spirit" is active. So to pray in a tongue means that one's understanding—literally, one's *mind*—is not fruitful. The same applies to singing or giving praise to God in a tongue. In the last instance, specifically, the hearers will not know when to say the Amen and thus add their own participation in the praise.

It is possible, of course, to read Paul's preferences in either of two different ways. One is to take Paul to mean that he prefers to pray, sing, and give praise in two different ways at two different times, sometimes with the "spirit" and without the understanding of his mind, and at other times in his normal language so that his understanding is actively involved. This implies that one cannot do both at the same time. Carson represents one form of this approach, suggesting "something probably like this": he will first pray in tongues and follow that immediately (having been granted the interpretation, as in verse 13) by repeating the prayer in the language he understands.<sup>34</sup>

The other way of reading this seems far more likely: namely, that when Paul prays, sings, or expresses praise he prefers to do so in conscious understanding of what he is saying so that both spirit and mind are fruitfully active. For this, only once is necessary since it is in the language one understands.<sup>35</sup> It seems especially startling to hear the implication that when one prays in his own language his "spirit" is not praying! But that is the inevitable meaning if praying "in/with one's spirit" is equated to praying in tongues. (And if the only way to pray "in/with one's spirit" is to do so in tongues, then surely every Christian ought always to pray in tongues!)

Either way—and I am satisfied that the latter is correct—one thing is clear: *Paul is not speaking about the exercise of a prayer language in the privacy of one's closet.* The context for the entire chapter is the public exercise of the gifts, and the praying, singing, and expressions of praise in verses 14-17 are all for the assembled church. This is clear from Paul's further atten-

34. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 104.

35. Though my purpose in this paper does not include interaction with commentaries, I did decide to check a number of well-known, Evangelical commentators to see how they view Paul's preference. On the whole, I found them disappointing, failing to make clear the possibilities or their own understanding. Some appear to agree with Carson, some with me. I did appreciate the observation of C. K. Barrent, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York, et al: Harper & Row, 1968), 320: "Rational prayer is not less spiritual than irrational."

tion to the expressions of praise, where he is concerned with the response of others who hear.

One may also ask why any reader would think the passage justifies praying in a tongue without likewise justifying singing in a tongue and expressing praise in a tongue? Furthermore, the clear implication is that it is better to do so in the language of the assembled church so that the others can understand and respond appropriately.

#### 14:18-19

These verses may be considered an inspired comment about the value of tongues: although Paul has spoken in tongues often, in the church he would rather speak five words in a language understood than ten thousand otherwise! Carson acknowledges this much: that Paul means he will at least *almost* never speak in tongues in church.<sup>36</sup> The question remains, however, as to when and why Paul spoke in tongues more than all his readers (v. 18). Carson, in accord with his view of tongues, thinks this was when Paul was praying privately.<sup>37</sup> I can only suggest that if we continue to view the tongues in the light of verses 21-22 and the book of Acts (see the next paragraphs), rather than as something different from those in Acts, it may be that Paul exercised the gift on those occasions when in one city after another Jews rejected the gospel and Gentiles received it. This would call for Paul to “turn from” the Jews in that city and so separate the church from the synagogue and focus his attention on Gentiles. The problem with *any* view of this is, of course, that Paul does not say when he spoke in tongues and so we are on unstable ground to speculate. After all, his point is not how valuable the tongues were to him, but how much more valuable was speaking in the language of his hearers.

#### 14:20-25

Verses 21-22 almost intrude on our survey of the chapter and clamor for interpretation. By any standard, they are difficult, seeming almost out of place with the surrounding context. Some suggestions help with this appearance of difficulty. The first is that verse 20 goes not with these verses but with the preceding verse 19. In other words, Paul wants his readers to respond to what he has said about the value of tongues with mature understanding, not as children.

36. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 105.

37. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 105. Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 132-33, agrees, but with more enthusiasm for the phenomenon.

The second suggestion is that verse 23 begins a new step in Paul's development of the subject, one that is connected by the relatively weak "therefore" (*oun*) to the larger discourse up to this point. This means, then, that verses 21-22 are essentially parenthetical, which accounts for the apparent disconnection. So we do well to focus carefully on these two verses.

Paul says that "tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not." Understanding this is highly important since it is the only place in the New Testament where we are told *what tongues are for*—their *purpose*, in other words.<sup>38</sup> Paul expresses this in the context of what the Old Testament says (v. 21), rebuking unbelieving Israel. Apparently reflecting on Isaiah 28:11 and Deuteronomy 28:49, he represents the Lord as having said that he would bear witness to His people ("this people") by means of those speaking other languages, and yet Israel would not listen to Him. This, says Paul, was the purpose of the gift of tongues: namely, to bear witness to the unbelief of Israel and to God's consequent judgment and the resulting implications of that.

Acts 2, then, is in perfect accord with this. On that Day of Pentecost, hundreds of Jews gathered outside the place where the Holy Spirit filled the first disciples. Many of those Jews lived in other countries and spoke the languages of those countries. To their amazement they heard the disciples speaking "the wonderful works of God" (v. 11) in their native tongues, the languages of the nations. They could hardly believe such a thing, since the Gentiles were "dogs" in their eyes. The things of God could surely not be given the honor they deserved in the barking of dogs!

The lesson was there for anyone to see. The time had come, in the economy of God, for the things of God to be spoken to the whole world (Acts 1:8) and not to the Jews alone. The measure of Israel's unbelief had been taken, and it was full. The gospel would go to the Gentiles, as is clear throughout Acts (13:46, for example), reaching its climax in 28:25-28. The gift of tongues served as a sign of the unbelief of Israel and of this wonderful new thing in the plan of God. In this light, it is easy to picture tongues occurring at various times when the Jews in various places needed confirmation that the gospel was for the Gentiles whose languages were now fitting for the good news. The other references to tongues in Acts (10:46; 19:6) tend to support this understanding.

This understanding of 1 Corinthians 14:21-22, and of its relationship to Acts 2, serves to add at least a small amount of weight to the idea that the

38. I do not mean to say that this verse tells the *whole* purpose of tongues, only that it gives us what is at least one of the primary purposes of that gift.



gift was intended to be temporary. When unbelieving Israel had received its sign, and the church had become convincingly Gentile, that sign was no longer needed.

Carson is familiar with one source that apparently presents essentially the same view of Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 as mine.<sup>39</sup> He dismisses it, saying among other things that it is “difficult to think how the use of tongues in private devotion can be integrated into” this synthesis.<sup>40</sup> Therein lies his problem, in assuming that the tongues were for private prayers. In fact, there is nothing at all (as I will discuss below) in the New Testament about the use of tongues in private devotion! And even if 1 Corinthians 14 were in the context of private devotion, the passage downplays the use of the gift (as Carson acknowledges), and the reason might well be that the Corinthians were *mis*-using it—not a startling thought after all!

In fact, Carson gets very close to the correct understanding of the point of 14:21-22. But he finally misses the point, as I see it, by confusing the unbelievers in verse 22 with those in verse 23. The cause of this, I believe, is that he fails to connect verse 22 closely enough to verse 21 and then fails to see that verse 23 moves to a further point.

Verse 22 is directly tied to the preceding citation from Isaiah and Deuteronomy by the “wherefore” (*hōste*). In that context the “this people” means Israel, as typically in the Old Testament. They are the ones who in spite of God’s judgment by foreigners refused to hearken to Him. Consequently the tongues—foreign languages—serve as a sign to *these* unbelievers, not to unbelievers as a general class of people. This is both a sign *against* them, a sign of their judgment and rejection, and *to* them, that this judgment entails God’s turning to the Gentiles represented by those languages.

Carson presupposes that the Corinthians were defending the idea that tongues served as a positive sign to unbelievers (in general), and that this controls all of Paul’s response in verses 21-25. This is speculative; there is no hint that such a claim had been made. And it downplays the obvious focus on unbelieving Israel. Indeed, had Carson not already effectively severed the connection between the tongues in 1 Corinthians and those in Acts 2, he might have seen how appropriate Paul’s words are for the original Pentecost experience, as I have outlined it above.

39. O. Palmer Robertson, “Tongues: Sign of Covenantal Curse and Blessing,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975), 49-53. I have not read this article and cannot vouch for it.

40. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 110-111.

Grudem takes essentially the same position as Carson, and one of his observations is especially wide of the point of verse 21. He says that in this context “Paul makes no mention of the Gentile inclusion or of judgment on the Jews.”<sup>41</sup> There may be nothing direct about Gentile inclusion, here, but the reference to “this people” is clearly to the Jews and their unbelief that called for the judgment represented by the gift of tongues beginning at Pentecost. That judgment necessarily implies the inclusion of the Gentiles.

In verses 23-25, then, the unbelievers referred to are *not* the unbelieving Jews referred to in verse 22, for whom the tongues served as a sign. Consequently, tongues are not useful in a church meeting for unsaved visitors. Indeed, if such visitors come into the church’s assembly and observe people speaking in tongues, they will think the Christians are mad! By contrast, if some speak the truth to them in the language they understand, they may indeed be brought under conviction and be converted.

This understanding, by the way, helps with another puzzling thing about the passage: namely that verse 22 speaks of tongues as a sign to unbelievers, while verse 23 says that unbelievers will think tongues are a sign of madness. Two different classes of unbelievers are meant.

#### 14:26-40

The rest of the chapter (vv. 26-40) describes the conditions under which the gifts, including tongues, are to be exercised, emphasizing primarily orderliness. I say again that these inspired directions applied to times when all the gifts were still being given. If, as I have maintained, the gifts of prophecy and tongues are no longer given to the church, the directions for their government, although useful to give us principles for life in the church, are not ways to govern active tongues and prophecy in churches today.

In conclusion to this exegetical survey, I may note that the evaluation of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 is generally negative, with little more than a few positive concessions scattered here and there—and this at a time when the gift was definitely given! Those concessions are as follows.

- Verse 2: with tongues one speaks to God in the form of mysteries, *but* in prophecy one speaks to others for edification and this is why believers should seek to prophesy.

41. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 151.

- Verse 4: with tongues one edifies himself, *but* in prophecy one edifies others.
- Verse 5: I would that you all spoke in tongues, *but* I would rather that you prophesied.
- Verse 14: when I pray in tongues my spirit prays, *but* my understanding is unfruitful, so my decision is to pray in such a way that both are fruitfully involved.
- Verse 17: with tongues you give thanks well, *but* the other person is not edified.
- Verses 18-19: I speak in tongues more than all of you, *yet* in the church I would rather speak five words in our common language than ten thousand otherwise.

In other words, every positive thing said about tongues is a concession followed immediately by a “but” that contrasts a larger good. I find it difficult to glean, from this chapter, any real encouragement to speak in tongues.

#### 4. PROBLEMS WITH THE “MILDLY CHARISMATIC” VIEW OF PROPHECY

Although this is not the primary focus of this presentation, I find it necessary to give some attention to what I view as defects in the view of Carson and Grudem regarding the gift of prophecy. The two interpreters are colleagues in this venture to reinterpret the sign gifts and provide a place for them in today’s church. Thus, what they say about tongues and what they say about prophecy unite in one common understanding.

I will point out five interrelated problems of a Biblical-theological or exegetical nature, interacting mostly with Grudem.

4.1. First is their severe reinterpretation both of *prophecy* and of the *revelation* required for the exercise of that gift. Christian interpreters have traditionally regarded the Biblical prophet as receiving a direct revelation from God and then speaking that revelation as God’s human mouthpiece—a work requiring miraculous, divine intervention in human affairs. Carson and Grudem have reduced this gift to a much lesser phenomenon.

For them, New Testament prophecy does *not* mean that one speaks directly for God in giving people the very message God has given for that purpose. It does not involve receiving direct, propositional revelation from God and then speaking it, as was true for the Old Testament prophets who always gave an infallible word from God. New Testament prophets, and prophets today, receive inner impressions or promptings—“revelation” in a lesser sense—from the Spirit of God and express to their

hearers what they understand the meaning to be. In doing this they may not be entirely accurate.

Grudem identifies New Testament prophecy as “speaking merely human words to report something God brings to mind” and characterizes New Testament revelation as having “only the authority of merely human words.”<sup>42</sup> In his view, “The prophet could err, could misinterpret, and could be questioned or challenged at any point.”<sup>43</sup> That is the reason every “revelation” by a New Testament prophet had to be critically evaluated (1 Cor. 14:29-30). Consequently, the prophetic gift manifested in the New Testament involved no threat to Biblical revelation or the finished Canon. Allowing for prophecy in the church today is likewise no threat. Let all who will prophecy. Then judge what they say in the light of the apostolic faith revealed in Scripture, and no harm will result.

A quotation from Carson helps flesh this out.

What preacher has not had the experience, after detailed preparation for public ministry, of being interrupted in the full flow of his delivery with a new thought, fresh and powerful, interrupting him and insinuating itself upon his mind, until he makes room for it and incorporates it into his message—only to find after the service that the insertion was the very bit that seemed to touch the most people, and meet their needs? Most charismatics would label the same experience a “prophecy.”<sup>44</sup>

Grudem’s view is the same, reflected in his informal comments about the non-charismatic church he attends:

In people’s actual prayer lives as well as in the personal conversation of the pastor in the pulpit to the congregation, people talk about the Lord leading them and guiding them in specific ways. Sometimes in ways it sounds very much like the gift of prophecy to me, but they don’t call it prophecy. They call it prompting or leading. I am thankful for all of that and I am very comfortable being in a home fellowship group where people pray and are

42. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, table of contents, 64.

43. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 69. On pp. 90-92 he cites a number of charismatic writers who appear to agree with his concept of prophecy in the New Testament.

44. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 169.

willing to say how they think the Lord is leading them and guiding them as they pray and what He brings to their minds. And they don't call it prophecy. But I'm thinking, "That sure looks like prophecy to me."<sup>45</sup>

Most of us will hardly recognize prophecy by this re-definition. Indeed, by this definition perhaps we all have the gift! I don't mean to be glib, and in fact I appreciate at least some of Grudem's motives. The interview from which the preceding quotation came reveals that he is concerned with people in the cessationist camp who are "ready to pounce on anyone who speaks of subjective forms of guidance" or on "anyone who speaks of dealing with promptings of the Lord." He believes, as we all might, that some traditionalists are "so suspicious of any emotional component, any subjective component in all of our relationship with God and with others that it tends to quench a vital aspect of the personal relationship with God in the lives of ordinary believers." This often leads, he says, "to a dry orthodoxy" that in turn leads to the church becoming "dry and static."<sup>46</sup>

What I fault, here, is not his desire to avoid formalism and to maintain room for personal promptings from God and being led by the Spirit of God. That is a worthwhile concern—though one that needs careful, Biblical discussion. But it is not necessary to reduce the Biblical gift of prophecy to such promptings in order to keep that in our experience. Anyone who is familiar with the preachers and laity of our denomination on a broad scale is well aware that this openness is far from dead!

More important is the fact that this kind of openness and conscious submission to impressions from the Spirit of God *ought to be the experience of every believer, when in point of Biblical fact the gift of prophecy is not for all Christians* (1 Corinthians 12:10, 28-30). But Grudem winds up in at least indirect contradiction of this, saying that the gift of prophecy is available to all.<sup>47</sup> It is, for him, a "congregational" kind of prophecy only.

4.2. An essential part of this view is that it requires a radical break in what otherwise seems a continuous seam in the Biblical representation of prophecy. The view provides us with two very different gifts of prophecy (just as Carson's view yields two different gifts of tongues). For Grudem, the New Testament prophets are fundamentally different from

45. Tim Challies, "Continuationism and Cessationism: An Interview with Dr. Wayne Grudem," dated December 13, 2005, and accessed at <http://www.challies.com/archives/interviews/continuationism.php>.

46. Challies, "Interview."

47. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 180.

those of the Old Testament, and their level of authority is commensurately less.

My response to this is that Peter's message at Pentecost at least appears to link New Testament prophecy with Old Testament prophecy.<sup>48</sup> He quotes the Old Testament God (via the prophet Joel) as saying, "I will pour out of my Spirit ... and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:16-21). In the Old Testament context of those words, New Testament prophecy would most likely suggest the same level of revelation and authority.

Grudem's view reduces revelation, in the New Testament, to little more than a sense of inner prompting or intuition.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, this means in practical terms that even if a prophecy gives direct instructions to a believer about a course of action, "these instructions should not be considered divine obligations" but should be viewed as the prophet's own fallible report of something he thinks was revealed to him by God.<sup>50</sup>

4.3. One of Grudem's arguments supporting this bifurcation in Biblical prophecy rests on the fact that the New Testament prophets must be judged (1 Cor. 14:29-30), and he cannot picture this as having applied in the Old Testament. Indeed, this point is crucial to the discussion. For both Grudem and Carson it logically implies that no New Testament prophetic utterances were regarded as a revelatory, authoritative word from the Lord, or else the church would not be instructed to judge the message received. This proves, they say, that there could be mistaken notions wrapped up in a "prophecy" that really was prompted by the Spirit of God! Surely, they say, we cannot conceive such a thing as needed, much less encouraged, in response to Old Testament prophecy.

As I see it, there are two things wrong with this. First is the *assumption*—not in itself "exegetical"—that the hearers are judging to sift out the true from the false *within the words of a message that really originated with the Spirit of God* in "prophetic" impulse. That sounds suspicious on its own face. In fact, it seems far more likely that the need for judgment arose in order to distinguish between true and false prophecies or, as Robert

48. Some of my criticism at this point was helpfully influenced by F. David Farnell, "Fallible New Testament Prophecy / Prophets? A Critique of Wayne Grudem's Hypothesis," *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 2:2 (Fall 1991), 157-180. I do not fully endorse all of Farnell's critique.

49. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 111.

50. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 141. Grudem (64-65) is right, I think, to show that the word "reveal" (*apokaluptō*) does not always refer to direct, "special" revelation. Surely God does "uncover" various things to His people in various ways. But that does not reduce *all* revelation to a lesser sort.

Saucy puts it, to separate “that which is prophecy from that which is not.”<sup>51</sup> Grudem’s view, that “each prophecy might have both true and false elements in it, and those would be sifted and evaluated for what they were,”<sup>52</sup> leaves us with little confidence in prophecy as a gift of God. As a result, believers need to respond to it in the very same manner they would respond to a sermon or a Sunday school teacher, or even to personal advice!<sup>53</sup>

The second problem is the idea that this need for judgment is radically different from the situation in the Old Testament. We may not at first conceive the Lord asking his people to sit in judgment on the words of Elijah, for example. But, in fact, he *did* ask his people to sit in judgment on prophetic utterances, and in doing so to distinguish the true from the false. Clear examples of the tests to be applied appear in Deuteronomy 13 and 18. If the prophet—even when performing a “sign or wonder” that comes to pass!—entices the hearers to follow gods other than Yahweh, his message and standing are to be rejected (Deut. 13:1-5). Again: if a prophet, even when speaking in the name of the Lord, gives a word that does not “come to pass”—prove out, in whatever form it takes—then that prophet has not spoken from God (Deut. 18:21-22).

There is no reason to think, then, that this need (or basis) for judging the claims of prophets to speak revelation from God was fundamentally different in the two testaments. There is some discontinuity between the testaments, of course, and therefore there will be some differences in detail. But there is also a basic continuity, and this is unnecessarily broken by Grudem’s view. The people are not judging divine revelation, as such; they are judging the *claim* to give divine revelation. Whenever people claim to speak for God, hearers must judge what they say in the light of the truth already known. (And since the Corinthians did not have the *full* “apostolic deposit” the need was even more critical.)

Verse 29 affirms that “the others”<sup>54</sup> must perform this evaluative judgment: namely, the congregation as a whole. The writers with whom I am interacting agree.<sup>55</sup> For some reason, however, they want to disassociate this judging from the exercise of the gift of discernment. No doubt the lat-

51. Saucy, in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, 147. This does not quite mean to distinguish between true and false *prophets* as such. The question for evaluation would typically be, Is this a word from God?

52. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 61.

53. Which is exactly what Grudem says in *Gift of Prophecy*, 141.

54. The word (*hoi alloi*) is plural in the original.

55. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 57; Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 120; Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 114.

ter is broader, but it seems helpful to view the judgment of prophecy as a specific context for, or form of, *discernment*.<sup>56</sup> The word translated *judge* (*diakrinō*) has a fairly wide range of meanings, including to *pass judgment*, *render a decision*, or *distinguish between*. The root is the same as the noun (*diakrisis*) in 1 Corinthians 12:10, where “discerning of spirits” appears in the list of gifts. The Corinthians must evaluate and decide when a person claimed to speak for God. No doubt those with the gift of discernment would play a vital role in this.

4.4. A somewhat lesser argument of Grudem’s is that Paul felt free to disobey Agabus and the prophets at Tyre, thus showing that their message was not regarded as fully authoritative.<sup>57</sup> This reflects an old misunderstanding, in my view, of what was happening and what the text actually says in Acts 20:22-23 and 21:4, 10-13.<sup>58</sup> In these passages, the local prophets were receiving revelation that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem, and it was the *believers* who because of that revelation urged Paul not to go. Paul did not disobey God or the prophets, but he did reject the appeals of the believers who understandably, in light of the infallible revelation, pleaded with him to change his mind. And he did so with firm conviction that he was doing God’s will (20:24; 21:13). This makes sense of all the verses, so that in both 20:22 and 21:4 “the Spirit” means the Holy Spirit, and 21:4 means it was the disciples who urged Paul not to go as a result of what the Spirit had revealed. In 21:11-12 we see exactly how things were happening in various stops on this journey.

Nor can I agree that Agabus (21:10-13) failed to achieve “the kind of accuracy that the Old Testament required for those who speak God’s words” and had “the details wrong.”<sup>59</sup> By this Grudem means that it was not the Jews who bound Paul but the Romans, and that the Jews did not “deliver” Paul over to the Romans; instead they forcibly took him from them. But this is to force language into too-restrictive molds. We often attribute to people the things they are *responsible* for, even when they did not perform those things directly. Indeed, both Greek and English often use verbs *causatively*, so that Agabus’s words might simply mean that the Jews would cause Paul to be bound and cause him to be delivered to the Gentiles. Paul himself must have understood things this way when he subsequently reported that he was “delivered” (same verb as Agabus

56. I am indebted to Farnell, *Critique*, 177-79, for this idea.

57. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 75.

58. The late Dr. M. R. DeHaan had a series of messages on “The Mistakes of the Apostle Paul,” among which he included Paul’s going to Jerusalem. I developed my understanding of the verses long ago, in response to that.

59. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 78, 80.



used) into the hands of the Romans, clearly implying that this was at the behest of the Jews against whom he had done nothing to deserve such treatment (Acts 28:17)—a decisive answer, I think, to Grudem’s charge.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the symbolic act of Agabus with Paul’s sash is very much in the spirit of Old Testament prophecy. Again, *he* did not say that Paul should not go to Jerusalem, only that he would be bound there and fall into the hands of the Gentiles. I see nothing about Agabus’s prophecy that is less than entirely accurate.

4.5. Another essential part of Grudem’s theory is that it was only the New Testament apostles that had the gift of prophecy in the same sense as Old Testament prophets.<sup>61</sup> In support of this he interprets the words “the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20; 3:5) to refer to *one* group of persons rather than two groups (as readers would probably be more likely to think). This is an exegetical issue, of course.

In Ephesians 2:20 the church is said to be built on the foundation of “the apostles and prophets.” Since the words speak to the foundation of truth laid down for the church, for Grudem this honor must be reserved for the apostles. In that case the “prophets” must be the *same* as the apostles. This he supports by noting that in the Greek there is but one definite article linking the two nouns, thus more likely meaning one and the same group: apostles-prophets.<sup>62</sup>

But there is simply no syntactical rule that in the New Testament two plural nouns linked under one definite article, connected by *and*, must refer to the same persons. They *may* be the same, or they may *not* be; only the context can point in one direction or the other. The decision must be made by the interpreter.

60. I have Saucy, in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, 231, to thank for pointing out this verse.

61. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 67-68, also argues that since Paul in 1 Cor. 14:37 asserts his own authority over that of the prophets at Corinth, this shows both that the apostles were superior to the regular prophets and that the prophets exercised a lesser authority than Old Testament prophets. This appears to read into Paul more than is justified. He is simply claiming (rightfully) that what he has written in this chapter is, indeed, from the Lord and that anyone, prophet or otherwise, will submit to that or else show that he is not really submitted to God regardless of his claim to be a prophet or spiritual. See Saucy, in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, 147-148, for an appropriate understanding.

62. Here Grudem is grappling with the same issues that were long ago tackled by Granville Sharp, resulting in what has come to be called the Granville Sharp rule for interpretation of two substantives in the same case joined by *kai* under one definite article. But Sharp’s “rule” does not apply to *plural* nouns, as here. The 2000 edition softens Grudem’s reliance on this grammatical point but nonetheless maintains it. For a more recent grammarian’s discussion of this matter, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 270-290.

While I cannot say that Grudem's view is grammatically impossible, I can say that it seems clear to me that the context indicates two groups, apostles and prophets. In Ephesians 3:5 the "apostles and prophets" seem even more likely to identify two groups. Indeed, this understanding is surely supported by the fact that in the very same epistle (4:11) Paul clearly distinguishes apostles and prophets as two different gifts. *And there the syntax is not ambiguous.* In all his letters, Paul never again mentions apostles and prophets in the same breath except in 1 Corinthians 12:28, 29—where again it is clear that they are two distinct groups. It seems highly likely, then, that in all four places Paul means two groups. And in that case, the New Testament prophets helped lay the foundation of truth, confirmed in signs and wonders, on which we build the church.<sup>63</sup>

#### 5. PROBLEMS WITH THE "MILDLY CHARISMATIC" VIEW OF TONGUES

In this section I will offer criticism of the view of Carson, primarily, making some use of Grudem and Storms. Carson's work on 1 Corinthians 12-14 has been recommended as an outstanding example of good Biblical exegesis. I begin by acknowledging this: Carson's exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12-14 is generally excellent. I could hardly do otherwise, since it is so much like my own!<sup>64</sup>

Carson sees the flow of thought of these three chapters in the same way I do. This includes the relationship of each chapter to the whole: namely that chapter twelve emphasizes the unified origin of the spiritual gifts in the one Holy Spirit and their complementary relationship to each other in the one body of Christ; chapter thirteen presents love as the essential context for the exercise of all the gifts; and chapter fourteen first uses the principle of edification as the basis for evaluating the gifts, as illustrated by a comparison of prophecy and tongues, then concludes with directions for governing the use of the gifts in the assembly. Our agreement extends, specifically, to the meaning of 12:31: namely, that the discussion of love in 13:1-13 is the "more excellent way" to be described before turning to an explanation of "the best gifts" (chapter 14) as those most useful for edification of the church. And in most ways his explana-

63. Some interpreters take the prophets in Eph. 2:20 to be *Old Testament* prophets. Pursuing this is beyond the scope of this paper.

64. Both his volume and my Randall House Commentary on 1, 2 Corinthians were published in 1987, so it is certain that neither of us was influenced by the other. It would be foolish of me, of course, to think that Dr. Carson would be aware of, much less make use of, my writings! No doubt both of us were influenced by numerous interpreters of stature.

tion of the comparison between prophecy and tongues in chapter 14 parallels mine.

5.1. My first criticism of Carson's exegesis is that (in a way similar to the redefinition of prophecy) he has on an inadequate basis reduced the gift of tongues to a much less threatening language of prayer, and preferably for *private* prayer (more on the latter below). Carson regards the gift of tongues, in 1 Corinthians, as specifically a form of *prayer*.<sup>65</sup> He can do this, of course, only because he makes the tongues in 1 Corinthians different from those in Acts 2, and I will come back to that below.

In his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14 itself, Carson first limits the meaning of the words "speaks ... to God" (v. 2) to prayer. This, I believe, is exegetically unwarranted. In context, speaking to God refers to the fact that other humans will not be addressed or understood. The second half of the verse, introduced by *for* (*gar*) is the reason for the first half. Whether in prayer or testimony or any other form of speech, a person speaking in tongues is understood *only* by God. Indeed, all spiritual speech—speech in the context of a Christian assembly—whatever its form, is at root speech to, or for, or in respect to God (the meaning of the Greek dative case), but when such speech is in a foreign language not understood by the congregation God is the *only* one who gets the message.

It seems clear that the matter of *prayer* in tongues does not arise in the passage until 14:14. If tongues speech was entirely a form of prayer, it is strange indeed that this is the first time the word *prayer* is associated with it, and equally strange that the gift is not (at least occasionally) named "praying in tongues." One should read again chapter 12, when the gift was twice named, then read 13:1, and finally read 14:2, 4, 5, 6, and 13. No hint that this is a form of prayer can be detected up to this point.

Indeed, in 14:6 the idea of prayer is foreign to the context: "Now I, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by a revelation or by [a word of?] knowledge, or by prophecy, or by a teaching?" Surely Paul does not contemplate "coming to" the Corinthians in prayer! The contrast would be essentially destroyed by viewing it as prayer. Paul is talking specifically about speech addressed to the congregation.

Furthermore, to make the use of tongues strictly a form of prayer destroys what seems clearly to be the three-fold reference to activities in church in verses 14-16: prayer, singing, and blessing or giving thanks. All of these must then become varieties of prayer, and while that may be eas-

65. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 104. Storms, in Grudem, ed., *Four Views*, 215, agrees that "speaking in tongues is a form of *prayer*." (Italics his.)

ier to conceive for the third, efforts to regard the singing as prayer are unconvincing. For that matter, even the third appears to be more like what we would call a word of praise or testimony.

Finally, the references to tongues in the latter part of the chapter certainly do not support the view that praying in tongues is meant. Verse 26 lists, in the same breath, “a psalm, a teaching, a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation”: all of them address the congregation. Nor do verses 27-28 suggest prayer, let alone verse 39.

One may ask why, if praying in a tongue actually enhances one’s sense of God’s presence, only *some* Christians should have that gift? Carson is firm, and right, in his discussion of 1 Corinthians 12:28-30 (and elsewhere), to insist that *not all believers receive this gift!*<sup>66</sup>

In the end, whether tongues were limited to prayer or exercised more broadly, the question of cessation is the same. But it strikes me that this is one of Carson’s exegetical moves that enables him to push the gift into the privacy of one’s prayer-closet without taking it away altogether. And that leads to my second criticism of Carson’s exegesis.

5.2. Although Carson does not quite close the door to public use, it is clear that he really prefers to see this gift exercised in private and not in the church. This is how he personally influenced the outcome of the issue in a church he served as pastor, and it satisfied him. Under his leadership, the church decided it would not actually oppose a public instance of tongues if it occurred, but “those who felt they had the gift were encouraged to practice it in private.”<sup>67</sup>

It is entirely mysterious to me how Carson can find justification in 1 Corinthians 14 for prayer in tongues in private. In the first place, if what I have just said is correct, tongues were not limited to prayer at all—and in that case they certainly cannot be limited to private prayer. In the second place, even if one lets the prayer-context of verses 14-15 swallow up references to tongues in the whole three chapters (as unlikely as that is), it is unambiguously clear that the context of chapter 14 is public worship!<sup>68</sup>

If anyone can promote the use of tongues in *private* prayer, it is well nigh impossible to see how he can do so based on 1 Corinthians 14.

66. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 50.

67. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 187. At various times he hints or speaks more directly about this approach.

68. He does acknowledge this: “That Paul has been talking about what he expects the tongues-speaker to do in the church is now confirmed by verse 16.” Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 104. The only way I can see to make Carson consistent is to view him as meaning that the tongues-speaker was *praying* in public.

Essentially everything in this chapter, if it justifies tongues at all, justifies it *in the church service*. The failure of others to understand the tongues (v. 2) can only be true when others are addressed. The rhetorical possibility of “coming to” them speaking in tongues (v. 6) is coherent only in that light. The response of others with an Amen (v. 16) can occur only in a public meeting. The prescribed limit of three to speak in tongues, and then only when an interpreter is present (vv. 27-28) makes no sense apart from the assembly. Indeed, the need for an interpreter (v. 13) clearly implies the need for others to understand. Nor does verse 39 sound like a warning against forbidding people from praying privately in tongues.

This is what I meant, earlier, when I said that there is nothing in the New Testament about praying in private in tongues. Anyone who clings to the validity of that practice is not basing it on New Testament exegesis. Furthermore, if there is no need to limit tongues to private use, in the New Testament, there is at the same time no need to limit them to prayer.

5.3. The position of Carson and Grudem, even if unintentionally, leads logically to the possibility that *all* believers have access to the gift of tongues (and to the gift of prophecy), in spite of the clear and unambiguous teaching of 1 Corinthians 12:29-30 that all believers do *not* possess either of these two gifts.

On several occasions Carson sounds the proper note that tongues are not for all. The question, however, is simply this: what *value* do they have for the person who uses them (as Carson believes best) in private prayer—or in any other way, for that matter? On one occasion he cites (possibly with approval, certainly without disapproval) another author who speaks of tongues “primarily as a more intense prayer experience in the worship of the inexpressible God.”<sup>69</sup> If prayer in tongues is “more intense,” that is at least some benefit. But Carson himself says essentially nothing—unless I missed it—that ascribes *any* benefit to the user.

Third Wave teachers are not so reticent, at least not if they are well represented by Storms. He exudes enthusiasm for its benefits, claiming that “most will testify how it has served to enhance and deepen their relationship with the Lord Jesus” and that tongues are often “highly emotional and exhilarating,” bringing peace and joy.<sup>70</sup> Consequently he asks the logical question, why God would withhold such a precious gift from any of his children.<sup>71</sup> And his answer is that He would not, which leads Storms to “solve” the problem of 1 Corinthians 12:29-30 by suggesting

69. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 79.

70. Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 120, 127.

71. Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 128.

that there are two forms of the gift even in this epistle: (1) a more formal gift to a few that enables them to minister publicly, the gift of 1 Corinthians 12; and (2) a more congregational gift that is available to all for private prayer, the gift of 1 Corinthians 14.<sup>72</sup>

I do not approve of this, of course, but I am inclined to wonder if Storms has not followed the logic where it leads, once one starts down the path of Carson's defining down the gift as a language of prayer. Grudem has also followed that logic and speaks freely of the "availability of prophecy to all Christians."<sup>73</sup>

5.4. Just as the mildly charismatic view divorced New Testament prophecy from Old Testament prophecy, so it also divorces the tongues at Corinth from those in Acts 2. Both Third Wave teachers like Storms and the mildly charismatic Evangelicals like Carson and Grudem agree that the tongues in Acts 2 were human languages, miraculously spoken by people who did not know those languages (and naturally heard by those who did). But they are just as sure that the languages in 1 Corinthians 12-14 were not. Instead, as manifested in 1 Corinthians 14 and in the church today, the tongues are "free vocalization," during which a person utters syllables that belong to no recognizable language patterns but are "coded" so that only another gift (interpretation/translation of tongues) can reveal their meaning either to the speaker or to others.<sup>74</sup>

This bifurcation of the gift of tongues in the New Testament is a serious exegetical weakness, in my opinion, unnecessarily complicating the text. After all, the language of the two passages, when it identifies the gift, is the same. Why must we now have, in effect, two different sorts of tongues to deal with? I am reminded of "Occam's razor," an old principle of logic, which posits that the most likely explanation of something is the one that is the simplest, that contains the fewest assumptions. I think the Biblical phenomenon known as tongues is best understood as a single gift.

Carson makes a brave effort to tie the two together, arguing that they are two forms of the same underlying gift that "serve a diversity of functions."<sup>75</sup> But his strong plea for this ("The differences in purpose or role should be embraced, not constrained by the dictates of a reductionistic grid.") sounds like special pleading. In the end, it matters little whether the tongues in Acts and in 1 Corinthians are two forms of the same basic

72. Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 129-30.

73. Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy*, 180.

74. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 85-86.

75. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 157.

gift (“1a and 1b”) or two different gifts (“1 and 2”). Either way, they are not the same, and—especially important—the exegetical conclusions drawn from one passage cannot support any understanding of the other.

Indeed, Storms complicates the evidence even more, postulating what amounts to *three* Biblical gifts—though he, too, calls them one: foreign languages in Acts 2, a gift to a limited few for public use of tongues in 1 Corinthians 12, and a gift available to any believer for private prayer in 1 Corinthians 14.<sup>76</sup>

There are, of course, some “advantages” to the bifurcation. One can clearly and Biblically affirm—as Carson does—that (as is clear in the text) the tongues in Acts 2 were foreign languages, and tongues-speakers today definitely do not speak foreign languages (as is clear linguistically). And yet, by taking the tongues in Corinth as “a different form” of the gift one can allow tongues today.

By the same token, one can Biblically and correctly assert—as Carson does—that speaking in tongues is *not* an evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and is *not* a gift that was intended for every believer. And yet one can make room for people who claim the gift of tongues to exercise that gift, even if encouraged to do so only at home in prayer.

Likewise, one can recognize—as Carson does—that the gift signifies nothing about the level of one’s spirituality and that the overall impact of Paul’s treatment of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 is negative. He speaks, for example, of the “sustained downplaying of tongues in chapter 14.”<sup>77</sup> And yet one need not think that the gift was of such a nature as to fade from the scene in the providence of God, thus making a place for it in today’s church—so long as its practitioners will keep it in a quiet place.

The question really is this: Was it the exegesis that led to these advantages, or was it the advantages that led to the exegesis?

#### CONCLUSIONS

Wrapping this up in a small package is not easy. I will attempt to do this in two steps, and the first is to express my perception of the mildly charismatic movement as a whole. These men move in larger circles than most of us. They encounter apparently genuine and godly Christians who support the continuation of all the *charismata* and at the same time wish for peace between the charismatic and non-charismatic wings of the Evangelical church. This has driven them to study carefully what the

76. Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 129-130.

77. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 36.

New Testament has to say about tongues and prophecy, and the result is a middle way between traditional charismatic and non-charismatic thinking.

The first thing they have found is that the traditional response to Pentecostalism is right: tongues are *not* a sign of the baptism of the Spirit and are *not* intended for all Christians. We are grateful for this finding, as well as for the frank acknowledgement that those who speak in tongues are not speaking in human languages as did those in Acts 2. They have found something else, however, in the nooks and crannies of their exegesis: some grounds for defining down the gifts we thought were miraculous in order to fit in with the continuationist view of the gifts.

Thus defined, the gifts are neither so spectacular as we thought nor so threatening. We can make room for them in the church, they say. Prophecy is little more than Spirit-prompted impulses, requiring the same evaluation that one must give to a pastor or teacher. Tongues-speaking is a language of prayer, preferably in private. This way, the gifts we feared can be kept under control, and we do not have to take the hard road of arguing that they were meant to be temporary in the life of the church. We can put to rest the issue that has created such division. We can be continuationists, mildly charismatic, without being Pentecostal.

This is, of course, my perception—and perhaps a highly presumptuous one at that. It may even be inaccurate, at least if it is taken to speak to motives. As a statement about results, however, it seems a likely one.

The second step is to summarize why I think this approach to prophecy and tongues will not be successful, to any large degree, except among those already open to Third Wave theology. Here are some reasons I have for saying that, in the end, this “mildly charismatic” perspective is not persuasive.

1. As is often the case, the middle position will finally satisfy neither side.

2. People will recognize that Grudem’s view of prophecy amounts to little more than applying a Biblical term in a new way, using it to identify the regular experiences of Christians sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

3. As I have noted earlier, the evaluation of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 is characteristically negative, with scattered positive concessions placed in contrast to a larger good—and this at a time when the gift was definitely given!



Carson himself testifies to “the sustained downplaying of tongues in chapter 14.”<sup>78</sup> And when he finally describes the way he and his church dealt with the issue he acknowledges, with satisfaction, that “the general effect was to downplay the importance of the phenomenon,” which, he says, “is surely in line with one of Paul’s aims in 1 Corinthians 12-14.”<sup>79</sup> This is a telling admission, even if he means that Paul downplayed the tongues only because the Corinthians wrongly valued or abused the gift.

4. Such gifts as these cease to be *sign* gifts in any meaningful sense. We are grateful that these interpreters do not think of tongues as signs of Spirit-baptism or even of a higher level of spirituality. As Storms makes the point, “*tongues is not a sign of anything*!”<sup>80</sup> But they have taken away the element of miracle that seems to be obvious in the Biblical picture of such gifts. In their view, both tongues and prophecy are only mildly, if at all, “miraculous.” They have no value as “signs and wonders.” They cannot be tested.

5. In my earlier booklet, *What the Bible Says about Tongues*, I concluded with the question, What if I’m wrong? Similarly, I ask now, What if the argument for cessationism is not convincing? In that case, I would observe that the Third Wave and mildly charismatic thinkers are still wrong. No objective exegesis of the New Testament can demonstrate: (1) that the gifts of tongues and prophecy, in any sense, are available to all believers; (2) that tongues are “free vocalization”; (3) that tongues are meant to be a language of prayer; or (4) that the tongues are for *private* prayer.

6. Interpreting the tongues in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 as two gifts, even as two forms of the same gift, is especially disappointing, raising as it does the need to explain two different sets of phenomena: the gift of foreign languages and the gift of a non-human language. This means that the exegetical results at one place (Acts 2, where the explanation is clearer) cannot carry over to the other. A solution that views them both as the same phenomenon will remain more satisfactory to most interpreters.

7. In the end, any exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14, regardless how capable and correct, depends entirely on the more basic issue of cessationism versus continuationism. My pragmatic judgment is that neither side has made an exegetical case that will finally win the other side over. Most cessationists will continue to hold that position, and in that case the exercise of the gifts at Corinth proves nothing about the validity of the gifts for

78. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 36.

79. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 187.

80. Storms, *Spiritual Gifts*, 120. The emphasis is his.

today. Paul wrote the words while the gift was most certainly current. Whatever is positive about the gift, there, is positive only so long as the gift exists. Whatever is negative or speaks about regulating the gift applies only so long as it is meant to be in use.

This is an obvious point, of course, but it is easy to miss it. Storms misses it precisely in his response to Gaffin's assertion that Paul's advice to the tongues-speaker in 1 Corinthians 14:28 cannot refer to private prayer because the context pertains to the church assembly (as I have argued above). Storms says, "But if this were the case, it would seem to put Gaffin in the position of endorsing the legitimacy of ... speaking in tongues *in the corporate meeting of the church*, a view that I am quite certain he would not want to embrace."<sup>81</sup> But in fact Gaffin would have to accept this "legitimacy" *only for the period when the gift was being given*, and I see no reason he would object to that! I certainly would not.

It is easy to fall into this trap. Every interpreter must be on guard lest impressive discussion of what the text meant at the time, when the circumstances were as described, causes one to lose himself in the discussion and forget an equally important and more fundamental question: are the sign gifts still given? I think there is enough positive Biblical evidence about the nature and purpose of the sign gifts to conclude that they were not meant to continue past the apostolic period.

Note: I had thought to add a brief bibliography, here, for further reading on this subject. But when I thought to do this I recognized that the footnotes will point the reader to the very sources I might otherwise have listed.

81. Storms, "A Third Wave Conclusion," *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, 319-320.