

12. **“TONGUES WILL CEASE --- BUT WHEN?”**

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We have asked the all-important question, “*Why Tongues?*”

The combined evidence from the Old Testament, from the only three recorded instances when “languages” occurred in the book of *Acts*, and from the apostle Paul’s own rationale for their use in *First Corinthians chapters 12 - 14*, strongly suggests that “tongues” are a sign-gift for unbelieving Jews.

The purpose of a sign is to point to something beyond itself, some destiny, some greater reality. The sign is not the goal. Nobody camps under the sign that says, “20 klms to Melbourne” thinking they have arrived at their destiny!

**Praying in private is no sign to the unbelieving Jew in Jerusalem, Judea, or Samaria!
Praying in “heavenly prayer languages” in the secret place for self-edification is to utterly miss the chief purpose for tongues as a sign.**

THE MAN WITH THE RED CAP AND YELLOW TIE.

Let me illustrate. It’s the year 1885. We are living in the days before mobile phones (for my American reader that’s cell phones). In fact, we are living in the days of the steam train and when only a letter or a telegram could be sent ahead of you announcing your arrival. Photos are still a relatively rare thing for the average person.

Now, suppose you are a long lost relative of mine and are desperate to meet me. You wrote me some months ago informing me that you are going to be on the train arriving in my town on Tuesday May 5th at 3 p.m. But I have never met you before, so I write a reply (probably in beautifully handwritten ink) asking how I am going to recognise you in the crowd?

Your letter of reply arrives just in time (the day before) advising me you will be the man with the red hat wearing the blue coat with the yellow tie.

I now have the sign I need to identify you. When you alight from the train I spot the man with the red hat wearing the blue coat and yellow tie in the milling crowd. It’s you of course! The sign has done its job.

From now on I no longer need you to wear the red hat with your blue coat and yellow tie. I have perfect knowledge, for I have seen you face to face. The sign is superfluous.

This is precisely Paul’s point about the sign of languages God has given for Israel’s benefit. Once their purpose has been fulfilled, their use is no longer indicated. Which is to say, Paul informs the Corinthians that they are putting way too much emphasis on that which only

had an initial and limited value, and why they **will cease**. But *when?* When does the sign end? Let's read it carefully again;

Love never ends. **But** as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only *in part*, and we prophesy only *in part*; but **when the perfect comes**, *the partial* will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only *in part*; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (13: 8 - 13).

The apostle says the charismatic gifts of Prophecy, Tongues and Knowledge will come to an end ... **when the perfect comes** (*téleios*). But exactly what is "the perfect"? Two popular interpretations are offered.

1. THE CESSATIONIST POSITION

The traditional Reformed Protestant view is that the gifts of Tongues, Prophecies and Knowledge ceased once the apostles and that first generation of Christians had passed away. For obvious reasons this is called "cessationism".

For them, **the perfect** (*téleios*) refers to the completed New Testament. Christ and his apostles have spoken definitively, finally, fully. The Bible, the prophetic and inspired word of God has been written. No further revelation is, or can be, given to the church until the Day of the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world!

Now, it is true that, once the apostles passed from the scene the spectacular **signs and wonders and mighty works** of the apostolic office ceased (**2 Cor. 12: 12**). We no longer have the founding apostles with us --- those who had accompanied our Lord during his life and who had witnessed his post-resurrection appearances. That first and unique office has been terminated. There is no apostle around today to lay his hands upon anybody. Fact!

Thus, for the cessationist, **the perfect** has already come. Once the New Testament canon of Scripture was completed --- when the last living apostle John penned **The Book of the Revelation** --- the capstone of Biblical revelation was finally in place. Miraculous revelatory signs-gifts are now superfluous.

For cessationists, it is significant that John's last instruction to the church was a warning that, if **anyone adds to the words of the prophecy of this book, then God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and the holy city, which are described in this book** (Rev. 22: 18-19).

Whilst cessationists admit the primary reference here is to the prophecy of **The Book of the Revelation**, nevertheless the warning is general and applies to the entire Biblical canon.

These are the last written words from the sole surviving apostle, John. So, no words may be added to, or taken away from **the perfect** “word of God” in its final written form.

The need for the partial revelations of Prophecies, Knowledge and Tongues in the infant church was done. “**If they do not hear Moses and the prophets** (the OT Scriptures), and if they will not hear the Son of God and his apostles (in the NT), **neither will they be convinced** by any other sign(s) no matter how supernaturally convincing” (to put a little extra spin on Jesus’ own parable in **Luke 16: 31**)! (¹)

Now, we must be fair to our Pentecostal and Charismatic friends here. I know many fine Charismatic Christians who really do believe the Bible is the final and ultimate form of God’s revelation in all matters concerning the Faith and experience. They agree that the Bible must test us in all our ways. They do not believe that our experiences test the Bible.

They are charismatic precisely because the truth revealed in the Bible is to be ‘felt as well as spelt’. We are to know by first-hand experience the witness of the holy Spirit within our spirits that we are the children of God. We are to experience the fullness of the anointing power of the holy Spirit for victorious living today (and who could argue?).

They are charismatic precisely because the Bible says the Spirit will lead us, teach us, and yes, that God will speak to us in these last days in dreams and in visions just as the Bible says (**Acts 2: 17**). What is this but the Living God revealing Himself to us today in our experience, for our present enjoyment and encouragement, and all *according to Scripture*?

The comforting truth is that the Bible promises God will continue to directly act in our lives according to His promises in the Bible, and that His Presence will be with us to the end of the Age. Every believer should know the reality of answered prayer! None of this is adding to the Scriptures! Therefore, let us not take away from these uplifting words!

But of course, the question still remains: Does the Bible teach the miraculous sign-gifts of the apostolic church ceased once the New Testament in its final form completed the Bible? This is our *segue* to the second major understanding of what **the perfect** is ...

2. THE CONTINUATIONIST POSITION

Pentecostal and charismatic folk who favour the continuation of miraculous tongues, prophecies and special words of knowledge say **the perfect** refers to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ when we shall see our Lord **face to face**. Until then, we must be content with the partial. We can only see things dimly. On the day when Christ is fully revealed **we will know fully even as we have been fully known**.

¹ Another favourite passage for the cessationists is **James 1: 22-25** where they claim **the perfect law, the law of liberty** also refers to the written Scriptures. For a number of reasons this is problematic, in my opinion, but exegeting these verses would take an entire article in itself. **Martin Luther** himself particularly hated these verses in an epistle which he despised as a letter of straw! For him, any mention of the words **the perfect law** was anathema. How ironic that his descendants now appeal to **James 1: 22-25** to prove the completeness of the New Testament Scriptures!?

This “continuationist” view holds the *charismata* are with us till the end of this present Evil Age. They are necessary for the healthy functioning of the Body of Christ until his Coming. Without these gifts in evidence, the church is trying to fly with clipped wings.

This seems to be the most natural way to understand what Paul means by **the perfect**. For no believer should doubt that the reappearing of our blessed Lord Jesus will usher in God’s perfect Kingdom.

What a day that will be, when we see the face of Jesus, and enjoy the company of all the resurrected and redeemed of God. What a day that will be, when we shall be able to ask whatever questions we may have and hear perfect answers to all our present partial knowledge. Yes, what a day when that perfect kingdom is revealed in all fullness.

And doesn’t the apostle indicate at the very start of **First Corinthians** that the Christians in Corinth would exercise their gifts until the day of Christ’s coming? They had received the **grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you are enriched in everything by him in all utterance and all knowledge ... so that you come short in no gift (²), eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end (³), that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (chapter 1: 4-8)?**

This sounds very much as if the apostle anticipates the *charisms* --- the gifts of **all utterance and all knowledge** --- will be in use right up to **the day of the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ**. Paul anticipated the Corinthians would not **come short in any gift** in the meantime as they waited for the *parousia*. Surely then, it is the arrival of Jesus to usher in **the perfect kingdom** which ends the present need of the support-act of miraculous gifts?

This appears to be a strong case. However, there are one or two flies in the ointment.

HOW TO BEST TRANSLATE “THE PERFECT” --- τ έ λ ε ι ο υ ?

The adjective **perfect** (*téleios*) in I Cor. 13: 10 has a variety of possible nuances:- “the mature”, “the full-grown”, “the adult”, “the complete”, “the whole”, hence, “the perfect”.

In the NT we read about various kinds of perfection: **Perfect love** (I John 4: 18); a **perfect work and perfect gifts** (James 1: 4, 17); the **perfect law of liberty** (James 1: 25); the **perfect will of God** (Romans 12: 2; cf. Col. 4: 12); the **perfect man** (Eph. 4: 13); the **perfect minded** (Phil. 3: 15). You get the idea.

All these verses speak of something which is already --- or should already be --- perfect **now**. They all speak about some quality of behaviour or character to be arrived at in **this life**. In fact, we are commanded by none other than Christ himself to **be perfect as your heavenly Father who is in heaven is perfect** --- and Jesus clearly intends this perfection for us **today** (Matt. 5: 48)!

² *Charismati*

³ *telous*

Jesus suggested to “the rich young ruler” that if he wanted **to be perfect** then he should sell his material abundance and follow him. Jesus wanted the young man to find perfection *this side of the Kingdom* so that he might eventually enter the future Kingdom (Matt. 19:21)!

Likewise, the apostle James wants believers to attain to perfect character by bridling our tongues here and now (James 3: 2). Paul says his mission is to faithfully warn every believer so **that we may present every one perfect in Christ** (Col. 1: 28). Paul wants the Church to be **perfect before the return of Jesus so they might stand before him already complete at his appearing!**

All these references to perfection for the believer are applied *this side* of the Second Coming of Christ. We must --- and indeed can --- become mature, full-grown adults in understanding and character as to God’s will for our lives now.

The *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* concurs saying; **téleios applies to those who have reached maturity, the spiritually adult who have come of age ... it signifies the undivided wholeness of a person in his or her behaviour ... the anticipation in time of eschatological wholeness in actual present-day living... the wholeness that a person is given and promised. (⁴)**

That is to say, perfection now holds the hope and the promise for future completion! How then should we best translate (*téleios*) in I Cor. 13: 10? As it relates to maturity of character and understanding necessary now in this life, or to the ultimate perfection of God’s end-time kingdom?

Making our task more challenging is that the same word is used to refer to **the end (*télos*)** when Christ hands over the kingdom to his God. In **First Corinthians 15: 24 *télos*** refers to the consummation of God’s plan of the ages when the whole sweep of cosmic history reaches its final and perfect destination --- in that kingdom when **the Son** bows in subjection to the Father, and **God** becomes **all in all**. The goal has been reached. Universal perfection when God the Father sums up, and gathers up, all things unto Himself in Christ!

So, *télos* can have an eschatological significance. The question is; Is this the context of **the perfect** in **First Corinthians 13: 10**? Does Paul say **tongues will cease** when Christ brings in his perfect kingdom at the Second Coming? Or, does Paul say **tongues will cease** once the Corinthians grow up into a full adult understanding and maturity of Christian character in their practice of the charismatic gifts? Or perhaps, both?

Clearly, the option we choose has huge significance for the “cessationist” who says the sign-gifts have already ceased because we have a completed Bible, and for the charismatic “continuationist” who says the gifts are with us until the end of this present Age.

⁴ *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Revision Ed. Moises Silva, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Second Edition, Vol. 4, 2014, p 479, under entry **τ ε λ ο ς**. (My underlining and emphasis)

CONTEXT ALWAYS HAS THE FINAL SAY

I consider the weight of evidence points to Paul longing for the immature Corinthians to become *perfect in their knowledge* of the use and purpose of the gifts.

My reason boils down to the context of **the perfect** in **13:10**. Paul has been talking about maturity, about character, about the need for the spiritual gifts to be controlled by love for the building up of the whole church, remember? That's the general context of the three chapters dealing with the "charismatic question".

The immediate context of **the perfect** in **13:10** only underlines the need for the immature Corinthians to grow up! *Just look at the very next verse; When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways (v. 11)*. Paul is dealing with their current need for maturity. He wants this matter solved straight away. I don't think he is saying, "Well, let's just hope Jesus comes back soon so we can have this problem sorted out once for all"!

Furthermore, as we have just seen, a few verses later on --- and remember there are no chapter breaks in the original letter --- Paul appeals to the immature Corinthian believers to **be children in evil, but in understanding to be adults** --- same word **téleios** (14: 20). We could just as faithfully translate this verse to read, **in understanding to be perfect!** Paul is appealing to them to be grown-ups, to become mature, and to arrive at a proper and full understanding of the whole charismatic question.

So, the general context as well as the immediate context concerns the need to arrive at a perfect understanding regarding the loving exercise of the gifts of Prophecy, Tongues and Knowledge.

Paul does not introduce the topic of **the perfect** arriving with the future kingdom until later in **chapter 15**, where he is discussing that whole new subject --- that of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and its inevitable promise of our own future bodily resurrection into the life of the Age to Come. Therefore, in **chapter 15** it's quite appropriate to interpret **télos** as pointing to the ultimate perfection of God's victorious kingdom-reign over all.

Now, someone will say, "But in **I Cor. 13** we read that **now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will be fully known (v. 12)**. Does that not sound like Paul really does have the eschatological end-time perfection in mind? Surely none of us will ever **see face to face** until the kingdom comes? Isn't he saying we can only dimly, partially know things this side of the Kingdom? What is this if it is not a reference to the arrival of the future kingdom-perfection?" Good point!

SCRIPTURA FIDES ... SCRIPTURE IS ITS OWN BEST INTERPRETER.

To answer this great question it will be helpful to compare another passage where Paul is also talking about gifts --- which Christ has bestowed upon the church since his ascension into heaven --- and their purpose;

The gifts he gave were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity (τέλειος) to the measure of the full stature of Christ. **We must no longer be children ... we must grow up** in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ... (Eph. 4: 11- 16).

The parallels with the Corinthian letter are obvious. **Same subject** --- Christ's various gifts to the church. **Same context** --- the call to reach maturity (i.e. perfection!). **Same grammar** --- here *τέλειος* is also contrasted with the immaturity of being **children**. **Same lesson** --- **we must grow up!** (⁵)

The Corinthians were far from fulfilling God's intentions for one of the more dramatic gifts ("tongues"), far from their intended purpose. They must **be no longer children**. They must **grow up** as their fellow-believers in Ephesus were being encouraged to do.

I therefore conclude that in 1 Cor. 13: 10, Paul is saying that, once the Corinthians grow up and become mature in their understanding of the proper use of the gift of Tongues, then they will put away their childish misuse of that gift.

Once this proper understanding dawns on them, they will see; **the perfect** will have arrived.

PAUL'S CONSISTENT LOGIC

There is one more vital piece of information we must add before finally settling on this conclusion. Failure to understand Paul's internal logic in **verses 8-10** has led to much current confusion. Let's take it a step at a time;

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end ... here the verb is transitive requiring an outside force for completion **... as for tongues, they will cease ...** here the verb is intransitive, requiring no outside influence for completion. *Tongues will just stop! Tongues will cease in and of themselves! ... as for knowledge, it will come to an end...* here the verb is transitive again, requiring an outside influence for completion --- the same idea as for prophecy;

Paul does not, as some believe, link prophecy, tongues and knowledge together in their cessation. One often hears it said, "If tongues have ceased then knowledge must also have ceased. We know that knowledge is still here, therefore tongues must still be here."

Such statements show ignorance of what the Apostle said. Far from linking tongues, prophecy and knowledge together, he separates tongues from the others by using the transitive and intransitive.

⁵ It's also worth comparing Paul's own aim for himself in **Phil. 3: 12f** where he strains every fibre of his being to press on to the goal of his heavenly calling. In this passage Paul also urges **those of us who are mature (τέλειοι) to be of the same mind ...**

In addition, even the voice is different. The statements about prophecy and knowledge are both in the passive voice whereas the statement concerning tongues is in the middle voice. (⁶)

This is not just an ex-Pentecostal minister with an axe to grind. *The Expositor's Greek New Testament* confirms;

The abolition of Prophecies and Knowledge is explained in vv. 9ff as the superseding of the partial by the perfect; they “will be done away” by a completer realisation of the objects they seek, namely by *intuition* ... and by adequate *comprehension* of the things revealed.

Of the Tongues it is simply said that “they will *stop*”, having like other miracles a temporary significance, not giving place to any higher development of the like kind, they lapse and terminate. (⁷)

Even if we didn't know these finer points of Greek grammar, we would still know that Prophecy and Knowledge are in a different category than Tongues. For, see how Paul combines Prophecy and Knowledge into their own separate group by the phrase **in part**;

For we know (Knowledge) only in part and we Prophecy only in part (v. 9). Prophecy and Knowledge are linked together by the common phrase, **in part**. Now look at **verse 10**;

But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part shall be done away. What is in part? Yes, Knowledge and Prophecy. Paul is saying that when perfection (i.e. mature understanding) dawns, then the gifts of Knowledge and Prophecy will be done away. And that happens in **verse 12** where the connecting phrase **in part** pops up again;

For now we see in a mirror dimly (we prophesy imperfectly) ... now I know (Knowledge) in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

Even if we admit, for the sake of argument, that **the perfect** really is the day when we finally stand before Christ, and therefore that the gifts of Prophecy and Knowledge continue till then, did you notice that having stated Tongues would cease in and of themselves, Paul says nothing more about that gift?

So, when did the sign-gift of Tongues cease? We already know the answer.

Since Tongues were **a sign not to the believer**, but to the **unbelieving Jew**, then as soon as Israel had been **trampled** by Gentiles in judgment --- once the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple had been razed to the ground in A.D. 70, and once the Jewish nation had been dispersed from their homeland --- the purpose for Tongues ceased. There was no longer any need for this warning sign for unbelieving Jews. Tongues just stopped! (⁸)

⁶ I was first alerted to this decades ago by ex- Pentecostal minister, *George E. Gardiner* in *The Corinthian Catastrophe*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, Third Printing 1975, pp33-34

⁷ Gen. Ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, M.A., LL.D., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, Vol. 2, p 900 (Italics original.)

⁸ This naturally raises the question as to whether “tongues” have been resurrected and are again relevant since the nation of Israel was reconstituted in 1948. I am not so sure, but that's a fit subject for another time..

CONCLUSION

I hold to a very strong view of the inspiration and finality of the written Scriptures. We do not need the writings of any so-called 'prophet Joseph Smith'. We do not need the so-called inspired prophecies of Ellen G. White. We do not need the words of 'the final prophet Mohammed'. We do not need the extra revelations and control of 'the Watchtower'. All these so-called revelations are claiming equal authority with the Bible. Or, they are claiming infallibility for their unique interpretations, with no reasonable doubts or questions entertained. They add and they take away. We've been warned about doing that.

So yes, the Scriptures are the perfect and final authority for God's people today. But the "cessationist" interpretation, in my opinion, needs the "continuationist" approach to balance things out. Head and heart must combine.

I also think it is better **not** to take **the perfect** in **I Cor. 13: 10** as the arrival of Jesus Christ to set up God's kingdom on earth, because this ignores the immediate and local contexts of the "charismatic controversy". The context concerns growing up into maturity. There comes a time when the children must put their outgrown toys away!

The "continuationist" interpretation also fails to understand Paul's logic that Tongues will just cease by themselves once the reason God gave the sign is no longer needed.

It makes far better contextual and grammatical sense to see how the apostle is teaching that, once the Corinthians arrive at a grown-up understanding both of the limited use and special purpose for the sign-gift of tongues, then **the perfect** will have come. After all, no one in their right mind camps under the sign that reads, "To Melbourne, 20klms" and thinks they have arrived at their destination.

Once the sign has done its job, there's no more need for the red hat and the blue coat and yellow tie! **The perfect** has come. Indeed, perfect 20 - 20 vision.

Postscript: If you have stuck with this extremely complex subject up to this point, you deserve more than a few Brownie points! You will have reached **the perfect** where endurance is concerned.

The next article will be less taxing on the grey matter. That's a promise.

