

The Cessation of Tongues and Prophecy

by Greg Loren Durand

It is the historic position of the Reformed faith that tongues and prophecy had a very specific role to play in the early days of the Christian Church. Not only were they clearly sign gifts which were given to validate the message of the Apostles, but, in the case of tongues, they served as a warning to the unbelieving Jews that the destruction of the nation of Israel was imminent. In Isaiah 28:11-12 we read, *"For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear."* These words were spoken by the Prophet to the people of Judah as a declaration that they were about to be judged by God for their rebellion by an Assyrian invasion. The presence of "unknown tongues" was also mentioned by Moses in his prophecy of the ultimate destruction of national Israel found in Deuteronomy 28:49: *"The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand."*

The New Testament covers the period just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the termination of the Jewish economy in the Year of Our Lord 70. God began His warnings to the rebellious nation of Israel through John the Baptist, who was sent to declare that the Kingdom was at hand. Following the death of John, the Lord Jesus picked up this same theme and began to warn Jerusalem of impending destruction should the people not repent of their rebellion. Of course, the Jewish leaders sealed the nation's doom when they rejected and crucified their own Messiah. It was not until Israel had thus transgressed against her God that the gift of tongues was introduced among the Apostles and their associates on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2); they were then used to call them to repentance. In this sense, they were, as Paul wrote, *"for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not"* (1 Corinthians 14:22a); they served as an indictment against Israel and a public declaration that her *"house [was] left... desolate"* (Matthew 23:38), and that the Kingdom of God was about to be taken from the Jews and given to another people -- the Gentiles (Matthew 8:10-12, 21:33-45).

Having established the purpose of biblical tongues, let us now determine the purpose of prophecy in the early Christian Church. According to Paul, *"[P]rophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe"* (1 Corinthians 14:22b). Since the New Testament canon was still in the process of being written, via the epistles of Paul, Peter, and the other Apostles, prophecy served the purpose of edifying and strengthening the infant Church to endure the persecution that God's enemies were bringing against her, and to offer hope that these persecutors were soon to be destroyed (Revelation 2:8-11). However, with the close of the canon, this purpose was fulfilled, and prophecy ceased. In Jude 3, we read, *"Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints."* This verse is very important in dealing with the finality of revelation and prophecy, for in it Jude clearly anticipated the closing of the New Testament canon of Scripture. The phrase *"once for all"* is noteworthy. Actually, only one Greek word (*hapax*) is used here, which indicates "what is of perpetual validity, not requiring repetition." Hence, the Scriptures themselves declare that there was not to be any further revelation beyond the apostolic age.

Another verse that may be cited in this regard is Ephesians 2:20, in which we are told that the Church has been *"built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone."* Paul here declared that the Apostles are part of the foundation of the Church. A building can have no more than one foundation, and the Body of Christ is certainly no exception. John 14:26 tells us that the Apostles were taught *"all things."*

In addition, Paul commanded Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:14 to preserve *"that good thing which was committed"* to him. Clearly, this *"good thing"* was identifiable or else Paul's exhortation would have been in vain. Since the Apostles were taught all things, there would be no need for further revelation. Indeed, what can be added to all things? Furthermore, the Apostles' doctrine became part of the New Testament canon, and because this revelation was complete, there can be no further scripture -- either verbal or written -- added to the canon unless it can be proven that the apostolic era has not ended. However, as noted above, the apostolic era served as the transition period between the Old Testament administration of the Covenant and the *"new heaven and new earth"* (Revelation 21:1) of the New Covenant; once the transition had been made, the apostolic era with its various apostolic sign gifts ceased.

The New Testament, of course, is not the only place from which this conclusion may be drawn. The Old Testament writers looked forward to a time when revelation would cease to be given by God through His Prophets. For instance, in Daniel's "seventy week" prophecy we read, *"Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy"* (Daniel 9:24). Verses 25-27 make it clear that when the "seventy weeks" (490 years) began, they would continue uninterrupted until completed. Since the prophetic "clock" began to tick *"from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem,"* which was given by King Cyrus (Ezra 1) exactly 483 years prior to the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River, we can only look for the termination of this period in the First Century. As prophesied, Christ's death and resurrection made an end of the sins of His people (the elect), and therefore He accomplished the reconciliation promised by God through Daniel (Romans 5:10; Colossians 1:21). Most importantly, the *"everlasting righteousness"* of Christ has also been imputed to His people (2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 6:14; Philippians 3:9; Revelation 19:8). The destruction of Jerusalem in the Year of Our Lord 70 is clearly linked to the "seventy week" time frame. This is proven by verse 26: *"And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined."*

Finally, we come to the phrase *"to seal up the vision and prophecy,"* which is included within the "seventy week" time frame. According to E.J. Young, "Vision was a technical name for revelation given to the OT prophets (cf. Isaiah 1:1, Amos 1:1, etc.). The prophet was the one through whom this vision was revealed to the people. The two words, vision and prophecy, therefore, served to designate the prophetic revelation of the OT period.... When Christ came there was no further need of prophetic revelation in the OT sense."⁽¹⁾ Since there is no essential difference between the nature of Old and New Testament revelation, and the source of inspiration was the same God, there is no reason to doubt that all giving of new revelation ceased in the First Century.

Another passage that closely ties in with Daniel 9:24 is Revelation 22:18-19. Though in the New Testament, it is cited here because it describes in great detail the events which Daniel merely mentioned in passing, particularly the judgment and subsequent "divorce" of national Israel as God's peculiar people. In this passage we read, *"For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."* It is acknowledged by all that the primary focus of this warning was to prevent additions to John's revelation in particular, but it also bears indirect significance to the entire biblical canon in general. Despite erroneous attempts to place the writing of Revelation sometime around the Year of Our Lord 96, there is strong internal evidence that it was actually written prior to Jerusalem's destruction in the Year of Our Lord 70 (*i.e.* the Temple is said to still be standing

in chapter 11). Furthermore, Revelation 1:3, 22:6, and 22:12 demand a short period of time before the complete fulfillment of the prophecy of this book. Consequently, Revelation falls within the "seventy weeks" of Daniel 9, and since it is thus the last inspired book written, the prohibition of 22:18-19 applies to the entire canon of Scripture.

Finally, we come to Zechariah 13:3-5, which, in many ways, is similar to Revelation 22:18-19:

And it shall come to pass, that when any shall yet prophesy, then his father and his mother that begat him shall say unto him, Thou shalt not live; for thou speakest lies in the name of the LORD: and his father and his mother that begat him shall thrust him through when he prophesieth. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the prophets shall be ashamed every one of his vision, when he hath prophesied; neither shall they wear a rought garment to deceive: but he shall say, I am no prophet, I am an husbandman; for man taught me to keep cattle from my youth.

The context of this passage of Zechariah places "that day" within Daniel's "seventieth week" - the First Century. For instance, in Zechariah 12:10, we find a prophecy of the crucifixion of Christ -- the cutting off of the Messiah mentioned in Daniel 9:26. Also, in Zechariah 13:1, we read of "a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness" -- this is a symbol of regeneration, or the "everlasting righteousness" of the New Covenant referred to in Daniel 9:24. There is no denying then that continuing prophecy or revelation subsequent to the closing of the canon in the First Century is declared by God as worthy of the most severe punishment, and even of death. Why? Because it is false prophecy in view of the fact that God no longer speaks with men in a revelatory fashion, whether it be through unknown tongues, prophetic utterances, or the writing of additional "scripture." Indeed, to insist otherwise, is in effect, to say that God's revelation of Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ is insufficient. The Bible says otherwise: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

In closing, it is very important to note that, aside from various cult groups over the ages (*i.e.* Montanism, Mormonism, *etc.*), tongues and prophecy were not recognized by anyone in the history of the orthodox Christian Church as continuing past the close of the canon. It was not until the early part of the Twentieth Century that they "made a comeback" in modern Christianity with the Pentecostal Movement and gained popularity in the 1960s with the Charismatic Movement. It is also significant that the vast majority of those who claim to possess these gifts today are grossly ignorant of the most basic doctrines of Scripture and are, in many cases, proponents of outright heresy (*i.e.* adherents to the Faith Movement, the Manifest Sons of God, *etc.*). As a whole, modern Charismatics are guilty of willfully rejecting the Word of God in favor of "ear-tickling" false prophets. Does it not seem strange, in light of how God dealt with the Jews for this very same sin in the Year of Our Lord 70, that He would choose to pour out His Spirit upon such rebellious people today via tongues and prophecy, while failing to give such "blessings" to those in the Reformed faith who have remained true to His Word and faithful to His Covenant? Food for thought, indeed.

Endnotes

1. E.J. Young, *Commentary on Daniel* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), page 200.