

Chapter 52

Gifts of the Holy Spirit: (Part 1)

General Questions

What are spiritual gifts? How many are there? Have some gifts ceased? Seeking and using spiritual gifts

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

A. Questions Regarding Spiritual Gifts in General

In previous generations, systematic theologies did not have chapters on spiritual gifts, for there were few questions regarding the nature and use of spiritual gifts in the church. But the twentieth century has seen a remarkable increase in interest in spiritual gifts, primarily because of the influence of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements within the church. In this chapter we will first look at some general questions regarding spiritual gifts, then examine the specific question of whether some (miraculous) gifts have ceased. In the next chapter we shall analyze the New Testament teaching about particular gifts.

Before beginning the discussion, however, we may define spiritual gifts as follows: *A spiritual gift is any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.* This broad definition includes both gifts that are related to natural abilities (such as teaching, showing mercy, or administration) and gifts that seem to be more “miraculous” and less related to natural abilities (such as prophecy, healing, or distinguishing between spirits). The reason for this is that when Paul lists spiritual gifts (in [Rom. 12:6–8](#); [1 Cor. 7:7](#); [12:8–10](#), [28](#); and [Eph. 4:11](#)) he includes both kinds of gifts. Yet not every natural ability that people have is included here, because Paul is clear that all spiritual gifts must be empowered “by one and the same

Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:11), that they are given “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7), and that they are all to be used for “edification” (1 Cor. 14:26), or for building up the church.¹

1. Spiritual Gifts in the History of Redemption. Certainly the Holy Spirit was at work in the Old Testament, bringing people to faith and working in remarkable ways in a few individuals such as Moses or Samuel, David or Elijah. But in general there was *less powerful* activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of most believers. Effective evangelism of the nations had been diminished, casting out of demons² was unknown, miraculous healing was uncommon (though it did happen, especially in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha), prophecy was restricted to a few prophets or small bands of prophets, and “resurrection power” over sin in the sense of [Romans 6:1–14](#) and [Philippians 3:10](#) was rarely experienced.

But at several points the Old Testament looks forward to a time when there would be a greater empowering of the Holy Spirit that would reach to all of God’s people. Moses said, “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!” ([Num. 11:29](#)). And the LORD prophesied through Joel:

And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even upon the menservants and maidservants
in those days, I will pour out my spirit. ([Joel 2:28–29](#))

John the Baptist heightens people’s expectations of the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy when he announces that someone is coming after him who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” ([Matt. 3:11](#); cf. [Mark 1:8](#); [Luke 3:16](#); [John 1:33](#); [Acts 1:5](#)).

When Jesus begins his ministry he comes bringing the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit in his person. Luke writes, “And Jesus returned *in the power of the Spirit* into Galilee” ([Luke 4:14](#)). The result is that he teaches with great power ([Luke 4:15–22](#)) and he heals and casts out demons from all who are oppressed ([Luke 4:31–41](#)). Clearly, Jesus has come in the *greater new covenant power of the Holy Spirit* and he has come to *conquer* Satan’s kingdom.

¹ 1. When seemingly natural gifts (such as teaching, helps, administration, or musical gifts) are empowered by the Holy Spirit, they will generally show increased effectiveness and power in their use. Paul says the Corinthians were “enriched” in all their speech and knowledge as spiritual gifts came to them ([1 Cor. 1:5–7](#)). Any pastor who has preached for a time knows the difference between preaching in his own “natural” ability and preaching the same sermon under the anointing or empowering of the Holy Spirit.

² 2. The only thing that comes close to casting out of demons in the Old Testament is the fact that when David played the lyre for King Saul, “Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him” ([1 Sam. 16:23](#)), but David had to do this “whenever the evil spirit from God was upon Saul” (*ibid.*), indicating that there was no permanent relief from the demonic oppression that Saul experienced.

cf cf.—compare

In fact, he says that the power of the Holy Spirit at work in him enabling him to cast out demons is an indication that the kingdom of God has come in power: “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Looking back on Jesus’ life and ministry, John tells us, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

But this new covenant power of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the ministry of Jesus alone. He sent his disciples out, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” and told them, “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons” (Matt. 10:7–8). Nevertheless, this new covenant power of the Holy Spirit is not yet distributed to all who believed in Jesus or followed him, but only to his twelve disciples or to the seventy disciples (Luke 10:1–12).

The pouring out of the Holy Spirit in new covenant fullness and power in the church occurred at Pentecost. Before Jesus ascended into heaven he commanded his apostles “not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father,” and the content of that promise was, “Before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4–5). He promised them, “*You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you*” (Acts 1:8). When the Spirit was poured out on the church at Pentecost Peter recognized that Joel’s prophecy was being fulfilled, for he said, “this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16), and he then quoted Joel’s prophecy (vv. 17–21). Peter recognized that the new covenant empowering of the Holy Spirit had come to God’s people and the new covenant age had begun as a direct result of the activity of Jesus in heaven, for Peter said,

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and *having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear.* (Acts 2:32–33)

Against the background of Jesus’ ministry and the earlier ministry of the disciples with Jesus, the disciples present at Pentecost would rightly have expected that powerful evangelistic preaching, deliverance from demonic oppression, physical healing, and perhaps also prophecy, dreams, and visions would all begin and continue among those who believe in Christ, and that these things would be *characteristic* of the new covenant age that began at Pentecost. A further characteristic of this outpouring of the Holy Spirit was a widespread distribution of spiritual gifts to all people—sons and daughters, young men and old men, menservants and maidservants, in the words of Joel—all received a new covenant empowering of the Holy Spirit, and it would also be expected that all would receive gifts of the Holy Spirit then as well.³ In fact, that is what happened in the early church (see 1 Cor. 12–14; Gal. 3:5; James 5:14–15). As B.B. Warfield said:

We are justified in considering it characteristic of the Apostolic churches that such miraculous gifts should be displayed in them. The exception would be, not a church with, but a church without, such gifts....*The Apostolic Church was characteristically a miracle-working church.*⁴

(This is true regardless of what view one takes about the continuation of miraculous gifts after the time of the apostles.)

³ 3. See chapter 39, pp. 763–87, on the question of baptism in the Holy Spirit.

⁴ 4. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* p. 5.

2. The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts in the New Testament Age. Spiritual gifts are given *to equip the church to carry out its ministry until Christ returns*. Paul tells the Corinthians, “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7). Here he connects the possession of spiritual gifts and their situation in the history of redemption (waiting for Christ’s return), suggesting that gifts are given to the church for the period between Christ’s ascension and his return. Similarly, Paul looks forward to the time of Christ’s return and says, “When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away” (1 Cor. 13:10), indicating also that these “imperfect” gifts (mentioned in vv. 8–9) will be in operation until Christ returns, when they will be superseded by something far greater.⁵ Indeed, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in “power” at Pentecost (Acts 1:8) was to equip the church to preach the gospel (Acts 1:8)—something that will continue until Christ returns. And Paul reminds believers that in their use of spiritual gifts they are to “strive to excel in *building up* the church” (1 Cor. 14:12). Finally, in writing to the Ephesians, Paul specifies that when Christ ascended into heaven he gave gifts “to *equip* the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12).

But spiritual gifts not only equip the church for the time until Christ returns, they also *give a foretaste of the age to come*. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they were “enriched” in all their speech and all their knowledge, and that the result of this enriching was that they were “not lacking in any spiritual gift” (1 Cor. 1:5, 7). Of course, this *enrichment* in their speech and knowledge did not give them the perfect speech or the perfect knowledge that would be theirs in heaven, but only a foretaste or down payment of that heavenly perfection. Similarly, Paul reminds the Corinthians that spiritual gifts are “imperfect” but when the “perfect” way of knowing comes at the Lord’s return, then these gifts will pass away (1 Cor. 13:10). Just as the Holy Spirit himself is in this age a “down payment” (2 Cor. 1:22 NASB mg.; cf. 2 Cor. 5:5; Eph. 1:14) of the fuller work of the Holy Spirit within us in the age to come, so the gifts the Holy Spirit gives us are *partial foretastes* of the fuller working of the Holy Spirit that will be ours in the age to come.

In this way, gifts of insight and discernment prefigure the much greater discernment we will have when Christ returns. Gifts of knowledge and wisdom prefigure the much greater wisdom that will be ours when we “know as we are known” (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12). Gifts of healing give a foretaste of the perfect health that will be ours when Christ grants to us resurrection bodies. Similar parallels could be found with all the New Testament gifts. Even the diversity of gifts should lead to greater unity and interdependence in the church (see 1 Cor. 12:12–13, 24–25; Eph. 4:13), and this diversity in unity will itself be a foretaste of the unity that believers will have in heaven.

3. How Many Gifts Are There? The New Testament epistles list specific spiritual gifts in six different passages. Consider the table on the next page.

What is obvious is that these lists are all quite different. No one list has all these gifts, and no gift except prophecy is mentioned on all the lists (prophecy is not mentioned in 1 Cor. 7:7, where only the subject of marriage and celibacy is under

⁵ 5. This interpretation of 1 Cor. 13:10 is defended at greater length in section B below.

NASB NASB—New American Standard Bible
mg mg.—margin or marginal notes

discussion, but it is certainly included in the “whoever speaks” of [1 Peter 4:11](#)). In fact, [1 Corinthians 7:7](#) mentions two gifts that are not on any other list: in the context of speaking of marriage and celibacy, Paul says, “Each has his own special *gift*⁶ from God, one of one kind and one of another.”

These facts indicate that Paul was not attempting to construct exhaustive lists of gifts when he specified the ones he did. Although there is sometimes an indication of some order (he puts apostles first, prophets second, and teachers third, but tongues last in [1 Cor. 12:28](#)), it seems that in general Paul was almost randomly listing a series of different examples of gifts as they came to mind.

1 Corinthians 12:28

1. apostle⁸
2. prophet
3. teacher
4. miracles
5. kinds of healings
6. helps
7. administration⁷
8. tongues

1 Corinthians 12:8–10

9. word of wisdom
10. word of knowledge
11. faith
- (5). gifts of healing
- (4). miracles
- (2). prophecy
12. distinguishing between spirits
- (8). tongues
13. interpretation of tongues

Ephesians 4:11⁷

- (1). apostle
- (2). prophet
14. evangelist⁷
15. pastor-teacher

⁶6. The Greek term for “gift” here is χάρισμα (G5922) the same term Paul uses in [1 Cor. 12–14](#) to talk about spiritual gifts.

⁸8. Strictly speaking, to be an apostle is an office, not a gift (see chapter 47, pp. 905–12, on the office of apostle).

⁷7. This list gives four kinds of persons in terms of offices or functions, not, strictly speaking, four gifts. For three of the functions on the list, the corresponding gifts would be prophecy, evangelism, and teaching.

Romans 12:6–8

- (2). prophecy
- 16. serving
- (3). teaching
- 17. encouraging
- 18. contributing
- 19. leadership
- 20. mercy

1 Corinthians 7:7

- 21. marriage
- 22. celibacy

1 Peter 4:11

- whoever speaks (covering several gifts)
- whoever renders service (covering several gifts)

Moreover, there is some degree of overlap among the gifts listed at various places. No doubt the gift of administration (κυβέρνησις, G3236, [1 Cor. 12:28](#)) is similar to the gift of leadership (ὁ προϊστάμενος (from πρόιστημι, G4613) [Rom. 12:8](#)), and both terms could probably be applied to many who have the office of pastor-teacher ([Eph. 4:11](#)). Moreover, in some cases Paul lists an activity and in other cases lists the related noun that describes the person (such as “prophecy” in [Rom. 12:6](#) and [1 Cor. 12:10](#), but “prophet” in [1 Cor. 12:28](#) and [Eph. 4:11](#)).⁹

⁹9. Something can be said at this point about the relationship between gifts and offices in the church. As we look at these lists, it is evident that in some cases Paul names the specific gift (such as gifts of healing or administration or tongues), and in other cases he names the *persons* who have those gifts (such as apostles, prophets, or evangelists). Some lists name only the gifts themselves (such as [1 Cor. 12:8–10](#)), while other lists name only the people who possess those gifts (such as [Eph. 4:11](#) or [1 Peter 4:11](#)). And some lists are mixed, naming some gifts and some persons who have the gifts (such as [Rom. 12:6–8](#) and [1 Cor. 12:28](#)).

In addition to that, another distinction should be made: In cases where Paul names *persons* he sometimes gives a name that refers to an officially recognized *office* in the church (such as “apostles” or “pastor-teachers”). We would expect that such people would begin to function in those offices after they had received formal recognition by the church as a whole (this would be called “ordination” or “installation in office” for the office of pastor [or elder] for example). But in other cases, though the person is named, it is not necessary to think there was any official recognition or establishment in office in front of the entire church. This would be the case, for example, for “he who encourages” and “he who contributes” and “he who does acts of mercy” in [Rom. 12:6–8](#). Similarly, the New Testament does not clearly indicate that prophets or evangelists were established in any formally recognized offices in the early church, and the word “prophet” probably just refers to one who prophesied regularly and with evident blessing in the church. “Evangelist” could similarly refer to those who regularly functioned effectively in the work of evangelism, and “teachers” could

Another reason for thinking that Paul could have made much longer lists if he had wanted to is the fact that some of the gifts listed will have many different expressions as they are found in different people. Certainly the gift of serving (Rom. 12:6) or helps (1 Cor. 12:28) will take many different forms in different situations and among different people. Some may serve or help by giving wise counsel, others by cooking meals, others by caring for children or befriending an older person, others by giving specialized legal or medical or financial advice when needed within the church. These gifts differ greatly. Among those who possess the gift of evangelism, some will be good at personal evangelism within a neighborhood, others at evangelism through writing of tracts and Christian literature, and others at evangelism through large campaigns and public meetings. Still others will be good at evangelism through radio and television. Not all of these evangelistic gifts are the same, even though they fall under the broad category of “evangelism.” The same could be said about gifts of teaching or administration.¹⁰ All of this simply means that no two people’s gifts are exactly alike.

How many different gifts are there then? It simply depends on how specific we wish to be. We can make a very short list of only two gifts as Peter does in 1 Peter 4:11: “whoever *speaks*” and “whoever *renders service*.” In this list of only two items Peter includes all the gifts mentioned in any other list because all of them fit in one of these two categories. On the other hand, we could take the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king, and have a list of three kinds of gifts: *prophetic* gifts (in this broad sense) would include anything that involves teaching, encouraging, exhorting, or rebuking others. *Priestly* gifts would include anything that involves showing mercy and care for those in need or involve interceding before God (such as praying in tongues). The *kingly* gifts would involve anything having to do with administration or government or order in the church.

Other classifications of gifts are gifts of *knowledge* (such as distinguishing between spirits, word of wisdom, and word of knowledge), gifts of *power* (such as healing, miracles, and faith), and gifts of *speech* (tongues, interpretation, and prophecy).¹¹ Then again we could make a much longer list, such as the list of twenty-two gifts enumerated above. But even that list does not include all the possible gifts (no list includes a gift of intercessory prayer, for instance, which may be related to a gift of faith but is not the same as a gift of faith; no musical gifts are included on any

include both those who had formally recognized teaching functions in the church, perhaps in connection with the office of elder, and those who had teaching functions in less-formal capacities in the church but regularly taught with effectiveness in informal or smaller group settings.

For convenience, we will continue to refer to these lists as lists of “spiritual gifts,” although, to be more precise, we should realize that they include both spiritual gifts and persons who exercise those gifts. Since both the gifts and the persons are given to the church by Jesus Christ, it is appropriate that both are named in various parts of these lists.

¹⁰ 10. See the excellent discussion in John R.W. Stott, *Baptism and Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today* (Downers Grove, Ill. InterVarsity Press, 1964), pp. 88–89.

¹¹ 11. This classification is from Dennis and Rita Bennett, *The Holy Spirit and You* (Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1971), p. 83. The Bennetts’ actual categorization is gifts of revelation, gifts of power, and inspirational or fellowship gifts, and they list them in reverse order to what I have given here.

list either, and neither is any gift of casting out demons, even though Paul must have known that some Christians were more effective in that area than others). And if we wished to divide up *different kinds* of service or administration or evangelism or teaching, then we could quite easily have a list that included fifty or even a hundred items.¹²

The point of all of this is simply to say that God gives the church an amazing variety of spiritual gifts, and they are all tokens of his varied grace. In fact, Peter says as much: “As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s *varied grace*” (1 Peter 4:10; the word “varied” here is ποικίλος (G4476) which means “having many facets or aspects; having rich diversity”).

The practical outcome of this discussion is that we should be willing to recognize and appreciate people who have gifts that differ from ours and whose gifts may differ from our expectations of what certain gifts should look like. Moreover, a healthy church will have a great diversity of gifts, and this diversity should not lead to fragmentation but to greater unity among believers in the church. Paul’s whole point in the analogy of the body with many members (1 Cor. 12:12–26) is to say that God has put us in the body with these differences *so that we might depend on each other*. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Cor. 12:21–22; cf. vv. 4–6). It runs counter to the world’s way of thinking to say that we will enjoy greater unity when we join closely together with those who are different from us, but that is precisely the point that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 12, demonstrating the glory of God’s wisdom in not allowing anyone to have all the necessary gifts for the church, but in requiring us to depend upon each other for the proper functioning of the church.

4. Gifts May Vary in Strength. Paul says that if we have the gift of prophecy, we should use it “*in proportion to our faith*” (Rom. 12:6), indicating that the gift can be more or less strongly developed in different individuals, or in the same individual over a period of time. This is why Paul can remind Timothy, “Do not neglect the gift you have” (1 Tim. 4:14), and can say, “I remind you to *rekindle* the gift of God that is within you” (2 Tim. 1:6). It was possible for Timothy to allow his gift to weaken, apparently through infrequent use, and Paul reminds him to stir it up by using it and thereby strengthening it. This should not be surprising, for we realize that many gifts increase in strength and effectiveness as they are used, whether evangelism, teaching, encouraging, administration, or faith. Apollos had a strong gift of preaching and teaching, for we read that he was “mighty (or “powerful,” Gk. δυνατός, G1543) in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24 NASB). And Paul apparently had a frequently used and very effective gift of speaking in tongues because he says, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all” (1 Cor. 14:18).¹³

All of these texts indicate that *spiritual gifts may vary in strength*. If we think of any gift, whether teaching or evangelism on the one hand, or prophecy or healing on

¹² 12. This variety of ways of classifying gifts allows us to say that many types of classification are possible for teaching purposes, but we should beware of any claim that a certain way of classifying or listing gifts is the only valid one, for Scripture does not limit us to any one scheme of classification.

¹³ 13. See also 1 Cor. 13:1–3 where Paul gives examples of some gifts developed to the highest imaginable degree, examples which he uses to show that even such gifts without love would bring no benefit.

the other, we should realize that within any congregation there will likely be people who are very effective in the use of that gift (perhaps through long use and experience), others who are moderately strong in that gift, and others who probably have the gift but are just beginning to use it. This variation in strength in spiritual gifts depends on a combination of divine and human influence. The divine influence is the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit as he “apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor. 12:11). The human influence comes from experience, training, wisdom, and natural ability in the use of that gift. It is usually not possible to know in what proportion the divine and human influences combine at any one time, nor is it really necessary to know, for even the abilities we think to be “natural” are from God (1 Cor. 4:7) and under his sovereign control (see chapter 16 on God’s providence and human responsibility).

But this leads to an interesting question: how strong does an ability have to be before it can be called a spiritual gift? How much teaching ability does someone need before he or she could be said to have a gift of teaching, for example? Or how effective in evangelism would someone need to be before we would recognize a gift of evangelism? Or how frequently would someone have to see prayers for healing answered before he or she could be said to have a gift of healing?

Scripture does not directly answer this question, but the fact that Paul speaks of these gifts as useful for the building up of the church (1 Cor. 14:12), and the fact that Peter likewise says that each person who has received a gift should remember to employ it “for one another” (1 Peter 4:10), suggest that both Paul and Peter thought of gifts as abilities that were *strong enough to function for the benefit of the church* whether for the assembled congregation (as in prophecy or teaching), or for individuals at various times in the congregation (as helps or encouragement).

Probably no definite line can be drawn in this matter, but Paul does remind us that *not all have every gift or any one gift*. He is quite clear in this in a set of questions that expect the answer no at each point: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Cor. 12:29–30) The Greek text (with the particle μή, G3590, before each question) clearly expects the answer no to every question. Therefore, not all are teachers, for example, nor do all possess gifts of healing, nor do all speak in tongues.

But even though not all have the gift of teaching, it is true that all people “teach” *in some sense* of the word *teach*. Even people who would never dream of teaching a Sunday school class will read Bible stories to their own children and explain the meaning to them—indeed, Moses commanded the Israelites to do this very thing with their children (Deut. 6:7), explaining God’s words to them as they sat in their house or walked on the road. So we must say on the one hand that not everyone has the *gift* of teaching. But on the other hand we must say that there is *some general ability* related to the gift of teaching that all Christians have. Another way of saying this would be to say that there is no spiritual gift that all believers have, yet there is some general ability similar to every gift that all Christians have.

We can see this with a number of gifts. Not all Christians have a gift of evangelism, but all Christians have the ability to share the gospel with their neighbors. Not all Christians have gifts of healing (in fact, as we shall see below, some people say that no one today has genuine gifts of healing), but nevertheless every Christian can and does pray for God to heal friends or relatives who are ill. Not every Christian has the gift of faith, but every believer has some degree of faith, and we would expect it to be growing in the life of an ordinary Christian.

We can even say that other gifts, such as prophecy and speaking in tongues, not only vary in strength among those who have the gift, but also find a counterpart in some general abilities that are found in the life of every Christian. For example, if we understand prophecy (according to the definition given in chapter 53)¹⁴ to be “reporting something that God spontaneously brings to mind,” then it is true that not everyone experiences this as a gift, for not everyone experiences God spontaneously bringing things to mind with such clarity and force that he or she feels free to speak about them among an assembled group of Christians. But probably every believer has at one time or another had a sense that God was bringing to mind the need to pray for a distant friend or to write or phone a word of encouragement to someone distant, and later has found that that was exactly the thing that was needed at the moment. Few would deny that God sovereignly brought that need to mind in a spontaneous way, and, though this would not be called a gift of prophecy, it is a general ability to receive special direction or guidance from God that is similar to what happens in the gift of prophecy, although it is functioning at a weaker level.

We can even consider the gift of speaking in tongues from this perspective. If we think of speaking in tongues as prayer in syllables not understood by the speaker (see [1 Cor. 14:2, 14](#)),¹⁵ then it is true that not every Christian has the gift of speaking in tongues (and once again it must be said that some Christians would argue that no one has that gift today, since the age of the apostles has ended). But on the other hand we must recognize that every Christian has times of prayer in which his or her prayer is expressed not only in intelligible words and syllables, but also in terms of sighs, groans, or weeping that we know is understood and heard by the Lord, and that expresses needs and concerns of our hearts that we cannot fully put into words (cf. [Rom. 8:26–27](#)). Once again we should not call this a gift of speaking in tongues, but it does seem to be a general ability in our Christian lives that is somewhat related to the gift of speaking in tongues, in that it gives expression to prayer in syllables that we do not fully understand, but that the Holy Spirit nonetheless makes into effective prayer that is heard by God.

The point of this whole discussion is simply to say that spiritual gifts are not as mysterious and “other worldly” as people sometimes make them out to be. Many of them are only intensifications or highly developed instances of phenomena that most Christians experience in their own lives. The other important point to be drawn from this discussion is that even though we have been given gifts by God, we are still responsible to use them effectively, and to seek to grow in their use that the church may receive more benefit from the gifts of which God has allowed us to be stewards.

Finally, the fact that gifts may vary in strength allows us to recognize that a certain person’s gift (such as teaching or administration, for example) may not be strong enough to function for the benefit of the entire church in a large church where many people already have that gift developed to a very high degree. But that same person, moving to a younger, smaller church where few have gifts of teaching or administration, may find that his or her gifts are very much in demand and able to function for the benefit of the entire congregation. (In this sense, something that is only considered a general ability in one setting might rightly be considered a spiritual gift in another setting.)

¹⁴ 14. See chapter 53, pp. 1049–61, for a definition of the gift of prophecy in the church.

¹⁵ 15. See also the discussion of the gift of speaking in tongues in chapter 53, pp. 1069–80.

5. Do Christians Possess Gifts Temporarily or Permanently? In most cases, it seems that the New Testament pictures a *permanent* possession of spiritual gifts. The analogy of the parts of the body in [1 Corinthians 12:12–26](#) fits this, in that the eye does not become a hand, nor does the ear become a foot, but various parts exist in the body permanently.¹⁶ Moreover, Paul says that some people have titles that describe a continuing function. Some people can be called “prophets” or “teachers” ([1 Cor. 12:29](#)) or “evangelists” ([Eph. 4:11](#)). We would expect that those people have a permanent possession of the gifts of prophecy, teaching, and evangelism, unless some unusual circumstance would come along which would take that gift away. Similarly, Paul talks in terms of possessing spiritual gifts when he says, “If I *have* the gift of prophecy” ([1 Cor. 13:2](#) NIV). And when Paul requires that there be an interpreter present for anyone to speak in tongues ([1 Cor. 14:28](#)), he assumes that the church will know whether someone who has the gift of interpretation is present, which implies that that gift would be possessed by someone over time. When he says, “If any one thinks that he is a prophet” ([1 Cor. 14:37](#)), he realizes that some at Corinth will have functioned with the gift of prophecy frequently enough to think of themselves as “prophets.” All of these verses point in the direction of a permanent, or at least abiding and continuing, possession of spiritual gifts.

Indeed, in [Romans 12](#), Paul begins his sentence, “*Having gifts* that differ according to the grace given to us” ([Rom. 12:6](#)). And he tells Timothy, “Do not neglect the gift *that is in you*” ([1 Tim. 4:14](#), literal translation), again indicating that Timothy had had that gift over a period of time. Therefore it seems that in general the New Testament indicates that people have spiritual gifts given to them and, once they have them, they are usually able to continue to use them over the course of their Christian life.

However, some important qualifications must be made, because there are some senses in which gifts are *not permanent*. There are some gifts that are nonpermanent by their very nature, such as the gifts of marriage and celibacy ([1 Cor. 7:7](#)). Though Paul calls them gifts, in the lives of most believers there will be times at which they are unmarried, and times at which they are married. Moreover, some gifts, though perhaps exercised fairly frequently, still cannot be exercised at will. Effectiveness in the gift of healing, for example, depends on God’s sovereign will in answering prayer for healing. Similarly, prophecy depends on the giving of a spontaneous “revelation” ([1 Cor. 14:30](#)) from God, and simply cannot be exercised at will. The same could even be said about the gift of evangelism: It is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit to bring regeneration and enable someone to believe, so the evangelist may pray and preach, but only God can give the harvest of souls.

In other cases, some particular gift may be given for a unique need or event. Though it is not, strictly speaking, a spiritual gift in the New Testament sense, the return of Samson’s strength one last time at the end of his life ([Judg. 16:28](#)) was given temporarily for one final moment in his life. And, in the New Testament, the remarkable revelation of heaven Stephen had when he, “full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God”

¹⁶ 16. We should not press the metaphor of the body too far, of course, for people *do* receive other gifts, and Paul even encourages people to seek additional spiritual gifts ([1 Cor. 14:1](#)). But the metaphor does suggest *some* degree of stability or permanence in the possession of gifts.

(Acts 7:55) was a manifestation of the Spirit given to him only for that specific moment.

Another sense in which a gift may be non-permanent is if a person neglects his or her gift, and perhaps grieves the Holy Spirit or falls into serious doctrinal or moral error (as Samson did in the Old Testament, for example). In such a case the gift may be withdrawn. Certainly Paul warned Timothy, “Do not neglect the gift you have” (1 Tim. 4:14), and we may perhaps also learn from the parable of the talents, in which Jesus says that “to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Matt. 25:29).¹⁷

Moreover, we must remember that *the Holy Spirit is still sovereign in distributing gifts*: he “apportions to each one individually *as he wills*” (1 Cor. 12:11). The word here translated “apportions” is a present participle, which indicates continuing activity over time, and we could paraphrase, “The Holy Spirit *is always continuing to distribute or apportion gifts* to each person individually just as he wills to do.” This means that, although it is *ordinarily* the custom of the Holy Spirit to continue to empower the same gift or gifts in people over time, nonetheless, there is a continual willing and deciding of the Holy Spirit to do this or not, and he may for his own reasons withdraw a gift for a time, or cause it to be much stronger or much weaker than it was.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 (to be discussed below) indicates that the present spiritual gifts which we have are only for this age, and will be superseded by something far greater. Therefore in that sense no gift is “permanent” since every gift will be rendered useless at the time of the Lord’s return.

Within this discussion of the question of whether spiritual gifts are temporary or permanent, sometimes Romans 11:29 is mentioned: “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.” It does not seem to be appropriate to use the verse in the context of this discussion, however, for in this case Paul is talking about the status of the Jewish people, including their calling as God’s people and the gifts or blessings bestowed on them as a result of that status. Here Paul is arguing that God still has a purpose for his people Israel, but the question of gifts of the Holy Spirit in the sense of 1 Corinthians 12–14 is not in view at all in Romans 11:29. And certainly in any case this sentence would not be true as a totally unrestricted statement concerning spiritual gifts, for it is evident that through misuse, neglect, or grieving of the Holy Spirit, people can have their gifts diminished or removed by God’s sovereign choice.

6. Are Gifts Miraculous or Nonmiraculous? The answer to this question really depends on the definition of the word *miracle*. If we define *miracle* as “a direct activity of God in the world,” then all the spiritual gifts are miraculous because they are all empowered by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:11; cf. vv. 4–6). But in that sense *everything* that happens in the world might be said to be miraculous, because all of it is brought about by God’s providential work in creation (see Eph. 1:11; Dan. 4:35;

¹⁷ 17. Although the primary point of this parable has to do with rewards at the final judgment, it nonetheless encourages faithfulness in stewardship with what one has been given, and it is not unreasonable to expect that God would act toward us in that way, at least in principle, in this life as well.

[Matt. 5:45](#)).¹⁸ Therefore the word *miracle* loses its usefulness, because it is difficult for us to find something that happens in the world that is *not* miraculous in this sense.

It is better to define *miracle* in a narrower sense, as we did in chapter 17, above: A miracle is a “less common activity of God in which he arouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to himself.”¹⁹ In terms of this definition, only some gifts are “miraculous”: namely, those gifts that people think to be miraculous because they are amazed at the activity of God operating in them. Certainly we would include in this category prophecy (note the amazement of the unbeliever in [1 Cor. 14:24–25](#)), healing (similarly, note the response of people in [Acts 3:10](#) et al.), casting out of demons (see [Acts 19:11–13, 17](#)), or speaking in tongues when it is an actual foreign language and understood by others (see the description of Pentecost in [Acts 2:7](#)). Probably other remarkable phenomena would be included in the gift of miracles ([1 Cor. 12:10](#)) as well.

On the other hand, in this definition, some gifts would be thought of as nonmiraculous. Gifts of serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing, and doing acts of mercy (in [Rom. 12:7–8](#)) would fall in this category, as would the gifts of those who act as helpers and administrators ([1 Cor. 12:28](#)). But it is still the same Holy Spirit who gives them and works through them.

The point of this analysis is to caution us against making a supernatural/natural distinction in our minds whereby we think that some gifts are “supernatural” and some gifts are simply “natural.” The Bible makes no such distinction, and the danger of doing this is that we may tend to think that some gifts (which we think to be “supernatural”) are more important or more clearly from the Lord, and we may tend to devalue or deemphasize the gifts which we think to be “natural.” If we do this we will fail to see God’s hand in the working of all the gifts and fail to thank him for all of them.

On the other hand, the misleading supernatural/natural distinction could also cause us to be very suspicious about those which we think to be “supernatural,” or could lead us to think that they are very unlikely to happen in our own experience. In that case, we would tend to emphasize the gifts we thought to be “natural” and have a very low degree of expectation or faith regarding anything which we thought to be “supernatural.”

In contrast to this perspective, Scripture says that “all” the gifts are worked in us by the same Holy Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God ([1 Cor. 12:4–6](#)). The worldview of Scripture is one of continuity and continual interaction between the *visible world* that we can see and touch and the *invisible world* that Scripture tells us is there and is real. God works in both, and we do ourselves and the church a great disservice by separating these aspects of creation into “supernatural” and “natural.”

Finally, should we seek the more unusual or miraculous gifts, or should we seek the more ordinary gifts? Once again, Scripture does not make this kind of distinction when it tells us what kind of gifts to seek. Paul says to the Corinthians, “Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, *strive to excel in building up the church*” ([1 Cor. 14:12](#)). This means that we should learn which gifts are most needed in the church we attend, and then pray that God would give those gifts to ourselves or to

¹⁸ 18. See the discussion of various definitions for the word *miracle* in chapter 17, pp. 355–56.

¹⁹ 19. See chapter 17, p. 355.

others. Whether those gifts are thought to be miraculous or non-miraculous really is not the important point at all.²⁰

7. Discovering and Seeking Spiritual Gifts. Paul seems to assume that believers will know what their spiritual gifts are. He simply tells those in the church at Rome to use their gifts in various ways: “if prophecy, in proportion to our faith . . . he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:6–8). Similarly, Peter simply tells his readers how to use their gifts, but does not say anything about discovering what they are: “*As each has received a gift employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace*” (1 Peter 4:10).

But what if many members in a church do not know what spiritual gift or gifts God has given to them? In such a case, the leaders of the church need to ask whether they are providing sufficient opportunities for varieties of gifts to be used. Though the lists of gifts given in the New Testament are not exhaustive, they certainly provide a good starting point for churches to ask whether at least there is opportunity for *these gifts* to be used. If God has placed people with certain gifts in a church when these gifts are not encouraged or perhaps not allowed to be used, they will feel frustrated and unfulfilled in their Christian ministries, and will perhaps move to another church where their gifts can function for the benefit of the church.

In the case of individuals who do not know what their gifts are, they can begin by asking what the needs and opportunities for ministry are in their church. Specifically, they can ask what gifts are most needed for the building up of the church at that point. In addition, each individual believer who does not know what his or her gifts are should do some self-examination. What interests and desires and abilities does he or she have? Can others give advice or encouragement pointing in the direction of specific gifts? Moreover, has there been blessing in the past in ministering in a particular kind of service? In all of this, the person seeking to discover his or her gifts should pray and ask God for wisdom, confident that it will be given according to his promise, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting” (James 1:5–6). Sometimes God will grant this wisdom in terms of more accurate insight into one’s own abilities. At other times it may come through advice from others or through seeing increased blessing in one area of ministry. And Paul indicates that in some cases there may be prophecy that gives indication of a specific gift, for he says to Timothy, “*Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you through prophecy with the laying on of hands of the council of elders*” (1 Tim. 4:14, author’s translation).

Finally, the person wondering what his or her spiritual gifts are should simply begin to try ministering in various areas and see where God brings blessing. Teaching a Sunday school class or home Bible study is an excellent way to begin using the gift of teaching. Every community has opportunities for greater use of the gift of evangelism. People who think they may have a gift of healing could ask their elders for opportunities to accompany them when they go to pray for the sick. People who think they may have a gift of faith or a gift of intercessory prayer could begin to ask some Christian friends for specific needs about which to pray. In all of this, churches can give encouragement and opportunities for people to try out using various gifts,

²⁰ 20. See chapter 17, pp. 369–72, for a discussion of the objection that it is wrong to seek miraculous gifts or miracles today.

and can also give teaching and practical training in the proper methods of using various gifts. In addition, churches should continually be praying that God would allow people to find what their gifts are and then to be able to use them. In all of this the goal is that the body of Christ in each location grow up to maturity, until “the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, *when each part is working properly* makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love” (Eph. 4:16).

Beyond the question of discovering what gifts one has is the question of seeking additional spiritual gifts. Paul commands Christians, “*Earnestly desire the higher gifts*” (1 Cor. 12:31), and says later, “*Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts especially that you may prophesy*” (1 Cor. 14:1). In this context, Paul defines what he means by “higher gifts” or “greater gifts” because in 1 Corinthians 14:5 he repeats the word he used in 12:31 for “higher” (Gk. μείζων, G3505) when he says, “He who prophesies is *greater* than he who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, *so that the church may be edified*” (1 Cor. 14:5). Here the “greater” gifts are those that most edify the church. This is consistent with Paul’s statement a few verses later, when he says, “since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church” (1 Cor. 14:12). The *higher gifts* are those that *build up the church more and bring more benefit to others*.

But how do we seek more spiritual gifts? First, we should *ask God for them*. Paul says directly that “he who speaks in a tongue *should pray for the power to interpret*” (1 Cor. 14:13; cf. James 1:5, where James tells people that they should ask God for wisdom). Next, people who seek additional spiritual gifts should *have right motives*. If spiritual gifts are sought only so that the person may be more prominent or have more influence or power, this certainly is wrong in God’s eyes. This was the motivation of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8:19, when he said, “Give me also this power, that any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit” (see Peter’s rebuke in vv. 21–22). Similarly, Ananias and Sapphira sought glory for themselves when they purported to be giving the entire proceeds of the sale of their land to the church, but it was not true, and both lost their lives (Acts 5:1–11). It is a fearful thing to want spiritual gifts or prominence in the church only for our own glory, not for the glory of God and for the help of others. Therefore those who seek spiritual gifts must first ask if they are seeking them out of love for others and a concern to be able to minister to their needs, because those who have great spiritual gifts but “have not love” are “nothing” in God’s sight (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1–3). This is why Paul says, “*Make love your aim,*” and only after that adds, “and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts” (1 Cor. 14:1). He repeats the same theme again when he says, “since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, *strive to excel in building up the church*” (1 Cor. 14:12). Every person asking God for an additional spiritual gift should search his or her own heart frequently, asking why this particular gift is desired. Is it really out of a love for others and a desire to build up the church and to see God glorified?

After that, it is appropriate to *seek opportunities to try the gift* just as in the case of a person trying to discover his or her gift, as explained above. Small group Bible studies or prayer meetings in homes often provide a good setting in which people can try gifts of teaching or intercessory prayer or encouragement or prophecy or healing, for example.

Finally, those who are seeking additional spiritual gifts should *continue to use the gifts they now have* and should *be content* if God chooses not to give them more. The master approved of the servant whose pound had “made ten pounds more,” but

condemned the one who hid his pound in a napkin and did nothing with it (Luke 19:16–17, 20–23)—certainly showing us that we have responsibility to *use* and *attempt to increase* whatever talents or abilities God has given to us as his stewards.

To balance this emphasis on seeking and growing in spiritual gifts we must also remember that Paul clearly says that spiritual gifts are apportioned to each person individually by the Holy Spirit “*as he wills*” (1 Cor. 12:11), and that “God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, *as he chose*” (1 Cor. 12:18). He says that God has put various gifts in the church and not all are apostles or prophets or teachers (1 Cor. 12:28–30). In this way he reminds the Corinthians that ultimately the distribution of gifts is a matter of God’s sovereign will, and it is for the good of the church and for our good that none of us have all of the gifts, and that we will need continually to depend on others who have gifts differing from ours. These considerations should make us content if God chooses not to give us the other gifts that we seek.

8. Gifts Are Tools for Ministry, and Not Necessarily Related to Christian

Maturity. We must recognize that spiritual gifts are given to *every* believer (1 Cor. 12:7, 11; 1 Peter 4:10). Even immature Christians receive spiritual gifts from the Lord—this was certainly evident in the Corinthian church, which had an abundance of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 1:7), but was still very immature in many areas of doctrine and conduct. Paul says, “But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1). So spiritual gifts are not necessarily a sign of spiritual maturity. It is possible to have remarkable spiritual gifts in one area or another but still be quite immature in doctrinal understanding or in Christian conduct, as was the case at Corinth. Indeed, on occasion even *unbelievers* are able to prophesy and cast out demons and do miracles, for Jesus says that at the last day many will say to him, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” But Jesus will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers” (Matt. 7:22–23). It is not that Jesus knew them once and later did not know them; he says, “I never knew you.” They were never Christians, yet they performed many remarkable works. So *we must not evaluate spiritual maturity on the basis of spiritual gifting*. Maturity comes through a close walk with Jesus, and results in obedience to his commands in everyday life: “He who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6).

Why then does the Holy Spirit give us spiritual gifts? They are given for the work of ministry and are *simply tools* to be used for that end. They should never be a source of personal pride on the part of those who possess them, nor should they be thought of as a mark of maturity. We should strive simply to excel in loving others, caring for their needs, building up the church, and living a life of conformity to the pattern of Christ’s life. If we do that, and if God chooses to give us spiritual gifts that equip us for those tasks, then we should thank him for that, and pray that he would keep us from pride over gifts that have been freely and graciously given, and which we did not earn.

B. Have Some Gifts Ceased? The Cessationist Debate

Within the evangelical world today there are differing positions over the question, “Are all the gifts mentioned in the New Testament valid for use in the church today?”

Some would say yes.²¹ Others would say no, and would argue that some of the more miraculous gifts (such as prophecy, tongues plus interpretation, and perhaps healing and casting out of demons) were given only during the time of the apostles, as “signs” to authenticate the apostles during the early preaching of the gospel. They state that these gifts are no longer needed as signs today, and that they ceased at the end of the apostolic age, probably at the end of the first century or beginning of the second century A.D.

We should also realize that there is a large “middle” group with respect to this question, a group of “mainstream evangelicals” who are neither charismatics or Pentecostals on the one hand, nor “cessationists”²² on the other hand, but are simply undecided, and unsure if this question can be decided from Scripture.²³

Although some aspects of this question were discussed in chapter 17 on miracles, there are some additional considerations that can be addressed here, specifically related to the topic of spiritual gifts.

1. Does 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 Tell Us When Miraculous Gifts Will Cease? Paul says:

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but *when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away*. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13:8–13)

This passage is important to the discussion because in it Paul mentions the gift of prophecy as something that is “imperfect,” and then says that what is “imperfect” will “pass away” (1 Cor. 13:10). He even says when this will happen: “when the perfect comes.” But when is that? And even if we can determine when it is, does that mean that Paul had in mind something that would answer this “cessation” question for the church today? Can the gift of prophecy in this passage be representative of miraculous gifts in general in the church age?

a. The Purpose of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13: Paul interrupts his discussion of spiritual gifts with chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, in which he intends to put the entire discussion of gifts in proper perspective. It is not enough simply to “seek the greater gifts” (12:31a, author’s translation). One must also “seek after love” (14:1, author’s translation), thus coupling proper goals with proper motives. Without love, the gifts

²¹ 21. Many who say yes, such as the present author, would add the qualification that “apostle” is an office, not a gift, and that the office of apostle does not continue today (see chapter 47, pp. 905–12, for this argument).

²² 22. *Cessationist* refers to someone who thinks that certain miraculous spiritual gifts *ceased* long ago, when the apostles died and Scripture was complete.

²³ 23. The discussion in the remainder of this section on the cessationist debate is adapted from Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament Today* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, and Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), pp. 227–52, and is used by permission.

are without value (13:1–3). In fact, Paul argues, love is superior to all the gifts and therefore it is more important to act in love than to have any of the gifts.

In order to show the superiority of love, Paul argues that it lasts forever, whereas the gifts are all temporary (13:8). Verses 9–12 further explain why the gifts are temporary. Our present knowledge and prophesying are partial and imperfect (v. 9), but someday something perfect will come to replace them (v. 10). This is explained by the analogy of a child who gives up childish thought and speech for the thought and speech of an adult (v. 11). Paul then elaborates further on verses 9–10 by explaining that our present perception and knowledge are indirect and imperfect, but that someday they will be direct and perfect (v. 12).

In this argument Paul connects the function of prophecy with the time of its cessation. It fills a certain need now, but does so only imperfectly. When “the perfect” comes, that function will be better fulfilled by something else, and prophecy will cease because it will be made obsolete or useless (this is the probable nuance of the Greek term used here, καταργέω (G2934) “pass away” in vv. 8, 10). So the overall function of 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 is to show that love is superior to gifts like prophecy because those gifts will pass away but love will not pass away.

b. 1 Corinthians 13:10: The Cessation of Prophecy When Christ Returns: Paul writes in verse 10, “But *when the perfect comes* the imperfect will pass away.” The phrase “the imperfect” (Gk. ἐκ μέρους “partial, imperfect”) refers most clearly to knowing and prophesying, the two activities that are said to be done “partially, imperfectly” in verse 9 (also using in both cases the same Greek phrase, ἐκ μέρους). To bring out this connection, we could translate,

Love never fails. Whether there be prophecies, they will *pass away*; whether there be tongues, they will cease; whether there be knowledge, it will *pass away*. This is because we know *imperfectly* and we prophesy *imperfectly*—but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will *pass away*.

Thus, the strong links between the statements are made clear by the repetition of two key terms, “pass away” and “imperfect.”

No doubt Paul also intended tongues to be included in the sense of verse 9 as among those activities that are “imperfect,” but omitted overly pedantic repetition for stylistic reasons. Yet tongues must be understood as part of the sense of verse 9, for verse 9 is the reason for verse 8, as the word “for” (Gk. γάρ, G1142) shows. Thus verse 9 must give the reason why tongues, as well as knowledge and prophecy, will cease. In fact, the repeated “if...if...if” in verse 8 suggests that Paul could have listed more gifts here (wisdom, healing, interpretation?) if he had wished.

So 1 Corinthians 13:10 could be paraphrased, “When the perfect is come, *prophecy and tongues and other imperfect gifts* will pass away.” The only remaining problem is to determine what time is meant by the word “when.” Several factors in the context argue that the time of the Lord’s return what Paul has in mind.

(1) First, the meaning of verse 12 seems to require that verse 10 is talking about the time of the Lord’s return. The word “then” (Gk. τότε, G5538) in verse 12 refers to the time “when the perfect comes” in verse 10. This is evident from looking at verse 12: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; *then* I shall know even as I have been known” (author’s translation).

When shall we see “face to face”? When shall we know “even as we have been known”? These events can only happen when the Lord returns.

The phrase “see face to face” is several times used in the Old Testament to refer to seeing God personally²⁴—not fully or exhaustively, for no finite creature can ever do that, but personally and truly nonetheless. So when Paul says, “but then face to face” he clearly means, “but then *we shall see God* face to face.” Indeed, that will be the greatest blessing of heaven and our greatest joy for all eternity (Rev. 22:4: “They shall see his face”).

The second half of verse 12 says, “Now I know in part; then I shall know even as I have been known.” The second and third word for “know—the one used for “Then I shall *know* even as I have been *known*”—is a somewhat stronger word for knowing (Gk. ἐπιγινώσκω, G2105), but certainly does not imply infinite knowledge or omniscience. Paul does not expect to know all things, and he does not say, “Then I shall know all things,” which would have been easy to say in Greek.²⁵ Rather, he means that when the Lord returns Paul expects to be freed from the misconceptions and inability to understand (especially to understand God and his work) which are part of this present life. His knowledge will resemble God’s present knowledge of him because it will contain no false impressions and will not be limited to what is able to be perceived in this age. But such knowledge will only occur when the Lord returns.

Now what is the word “then” in verse 12 referring to? Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but *then* we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; but *then* I shall know even as I have been known” (author’s translation). His word “then” has to refer back to something in the previous verses that he has been explaining. We look first to verse 11, but see that nothing in verse 11 can be a future time Paul refers to as “then”: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways.” All of this refers to the past, not the future. It speaks of past events in Paul’s life by way of providing a natural human illustration of what he has said in verse 10. But nothing in the verse speaks of a future time when something *will* happen.

So we look back to verse 10: “but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.” Here is a statement about the future. At some point in the future, Paul says that “the perfect” *will* come, and “the imperfect” *will* pass away, *will* be “made useless.” When will this happen? This is what is explained by verse 12. *Then* at the time the perfect comes, we shall see “face to face” and know “even as we are known.”

This means that the time when “the perfect” comes must be the time of Christ’s return.²⁶ Therefore, we can paraphrase verse 10: “But *when Christ returns* the imperfect will pass away.”²⁷ Or, to use our conclusion above that “the imperfect”

²⁴ 24. See, for example, Gen. 32:30 and Judg. 6:22 (exactly the same Greek wording as 1 Cor. 13:12); Deut. 5:4; 34:10; Ezek. 20:35 (very similar wording); Ex. 33:11 (the same concept, and the same wording as some of the preceding passages in Hebrew, but different wording this time in the Greek translation of the Septuagint).

²⁵ 25. Greek ἐπιγινώσκωμι τὰ πάντα would say, “I shall know all things.”

²⁶ 26. I have stated it this way because, more precisely, “the perfect” in 1 Cor. 13:10 is not Christ himself, but is a method of acquiring knowledge which is so superior to present knowledge and prophecy that it makes these two obsolete. For when this “perfect” comes it renders the imperfect useless. But only the kind of knowledge Paul expected in the final consummation of all things could be so qualitatively different from present knowledge that it could provide this kind of contrast and be called “the perfect” as opposed to “the imperfect.”

²⁷ 27. D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 70–72, gives several similar reasons why the

included prophecy and tongues, we can paraphrase, “But *when Christ returns, prophecy and tongues (and other imperfect gifts) will pass away.*” Thus we have in [1 Corinthians 13:10](#) a definite statement about the time of the cessation of imperfect gifts like prophecy: they will “be made useless” or “pass away” *when Christ returns*. And this would imply that they will continue to exist and be useful for the church, throughout the church age, including today, and right up to the day when Christ returns.

(2) Another reason why the time when “the perfect” comes is the time when Christ returns is also evident from the purpose of the passage: Paul is attempting to emphasize the greatness of love, and in so doing he wants to establish that “Love never ends” ([1 Cor. 13:8](#)). To prove his point he argues that it will last beyond the time when the Lord returns, unlike present spiritual gifts. This makes a convincing argument: love is so fundamental to God’s plans for the universe that it will last beyond the transition from this age to the age to come at Christ’s return—it will continue for eternity.

(3) A third reason why this passage refers to the time of the Lord’s return can be found in a more general statement from Paul about the purpose of spiritual gifts in the New Testament age. In [1 Corinthians 1:7](#) Paul ties the possession of spiritual gifts (Gk. *χαρίσματα*, from *χάρισμα*, G5922) to the activity of waiting for the Lord’s return: “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This suggests that Paul saw the gifts as a temporary provision made to equip believers for ministry *until the Lord returned*. So this verse provides a close parallel to the thought of [1 Corinthians 13:8–13](#), where prophecy and knowledge (and no doubt tongues) are seen, similarly, as useful until Christ’s return but unnecessary beyond that time.

[1 Corinthians 13:10](#), therefore, refers to the time of Christ’s return and says that these spiritual gifts will last among believers until that time. This means that we have a clear biblical statement that Paul expected these gifts to continue through the entire church age and to function for the benefit of the church until the Lord returns.

c. Objections: Various objections to this conclusion have been raised, usually by those who hold that these gifts have ceased in the church and should no longer be used.

(1) This Passage Does Not Specify When the Gifts Will Cease

The first objection to our conclusion above comes from Richard Gaffin’s thoughtful study, *Perspectives on Pentecost*. While Dr. Gaffin agrees that “when the perfect comes” refers to the time of Christ’s return, he does not think that this verse specifies the time of the cessation of certain gifts. He thinks, rather, that Paul is just

time “when the perfect comes” must be the time of Christ’s return (with references to other views, and to the relevant literature).

Among “cessationists” (those who hold that gifts such as prophecy have “ceased” and are not valid for today), some, but not all, agree that the time “when the perfect comes” must be the time of Christ’s return: see John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 165–66, and Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), p. 109.

viewing “the entire period until Christ’s return, without regard to whether or not discontinuities may intervene during the course of this period.”²⁸

In fact, Gaffin argues, Paul’s overall purpose is to emphasize the enduring qualities of faith, hope, and love, especially love, and not to specify the time in which certain gifts will cease. He says:

Paul is not intending to specify the time when any particular mode will cease. What he does affirm is the termination of the believer’s present, fragmentary knowledge...when “the perfect” comes. The time of the cessation of prophecy and tongues is an open question so far as this passage is concerned and will have to be decided on the basis of other passages and considerations.²⁹

He also says that, in addition to prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, Paul might just as well have added “inscripturation,” too—and if he had done this, the list would then have included an element that ceased long before Christ’s return. (Inscripturation is the process of writing Scripture.) So, Gaffin concludes, it might be true of some of the others in the list as well.

In response to this objection it must be said that it does not do justice to the actual words of the text. Evangelicals have rightly insisted (and I know that Dr. Gaffin agrees with this) that passages of Scripture are true not only in the main point of each passage, but also in the minor details that are affirmed as well. The main point of the passage may well be that love lasts forever, but another point, and certainly an important one as well, is that verse 10 affirms not just that these imperfect gifts will cease sometime, but that they will cease “*when* the perfect comes.” Paul specifies a certain time: “*When the perfect comes* the imperfect will pass away.” But Dr. Gaffin seems to claim that Paul is not actually saying this. Yet the force of the words cannot be avoided by affirming that overall theme of the larger context is something else.

In addition, Dr. Gaffin’s suggestion does not seem to fit with the logic of the passage. Paul’s argument is that it is specifically the coming of “the perfect,” which does away with prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, because then there is a new, far-superior way of learning and knowing things “even as I have been known.” But *until* that time, the new and superior way of knowing has not come, and therefore these imperfect gifts are still valid and useful. Finally, it is precarious to put much weight on something we think Paul might have said but in fact did not say. To say that Paul might have included “inscripturation” in this list means that Paul might have written, “When Christ returns, inscripturation will cease.” But I cannot believe at all that Paul could have written such a statement, for it would have been false—indeed, a “false prophecy” in the words of Scripture. For “inscripturation” ceased long ago, when the book of Revelation was written by the apostle John.

So Dr. Gaffin’s objections do not seem to overturn our conclusions on 1 [Corinthians 13:10](#). If “the perfect” refers to the time of Christ’s return, then Paul says that gifts such as prophecy and tongues will cease at that time, and implies therefore that they continue through the church age.

(2) “When the Perfect Comes” in 1 Corinthians 13:10 Refers to a Time Earlier Than the Time of the Lord’s Return

Those who make this second objection argue that “when the perfect comes” means one of several different things, such as “when the church is mature” or “when

²⁸ 28. Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* pp. 109–10.

²⁹ 29. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Scripture is complete” or “when the Gentiles are included in the church.” Probably the most careful statement of this view is found in the book by Robert L. Reymond, *What About Continuing Revelations and Miracles in the Presbyterian Church Today?*³⁰ but another clear statement of a similar position is found in Walter Chantry’s book, *Signs of the Apostles*.³¹

Chantry’s argument depends on the fact that elsewhere in 1 Corinthians the word here translated “perfect” (Gk. τέλειος, G5455) is used to refer to human maturity (1 Cor. 14:20, “in thinking be mature”) or to maturity in the Christian life (as in 1 Cor. 2:6). Yet here again we must note that a word does not have to be used to refer to the same thing every time it is used in Scripture—in some cases τέλειος may refer to “mature” or “perfect” manhood, in other cases some other kind of “completeness” or “perfection.” The word τέλειος is used in Hebrews 9:11, for example, to refer to the “more perfect tent”—yet we would not therefore conclude that “perfect” in 1 Corinthians 13:10 must refer to a perfect tent. The precise referent of the word must be determined by the individual context, and there, as we have seen, the context indicates that “when the perfect comes” refers to the time of Christ’s return.

Dr. Reymond’s argument is somewhat different. He reasons as follows (p. 34):

(a) “The imperfect” things mentioned in verses 9–10—prophecy, tongues, and knowledge—are incomplete means of revelation, “all relating to God’s making his will known to his church.”

(b) “The perfect” in this context must refer to something in the same category as the “imperfect” things.

(c) Therefore “the perfect” in this context must refer to a means of revelation, but a completed one. And this completed means of God’s making his will known to his church is Scripture.

(d) Conclusion: “When the perfect comes” refers to the time when the canon of Scripture will be complete.

Reymond notes that he is not saying that “the perfect” refers exactly to the canon of Scripture, but rather to “the completed revelatory process” that resulted in Scripture (p. 32). And in response to the objection that “then we shall see face to face” in verse 12 refers to seeing God face to face, he answers that it may not mean this, but may simply mean seeing “plainly” as opposed to “obscurely” (p. 32).

In response, it may be said that this argument, while careful and consistent in itself, still depends on one prior assumption which is really the point at issue in this whole discussion: the authority of New Testament prophecy and related gifts. Once Reymond assumes that prophecy (and tongues and the kind of “knowledge” mentioned here) are Scripture-quality revelation, the whole argument falls into place. The argument could be recast as follows:

(a) Prophecy and tongues are Scripture-quality revelation.

(b) Therefore this whole passage is about Scripture-quality revelation.

³⁰ 30. Robert L. Reymond, *What About Continuing Revelations and Miracles in the Presbyterian Church Today?* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), pp. 32–34. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Analysis* (Memphis, Tenn.: Whitefield Seminary Press, 1986), pp. 31–33, lists both this view and the view of Dr. Gaffin (see objection 1, above) as acceptable options. See also the entries under Robert Thomas, Victor Budgen, and Thomas Edgar in the bibliography to chapter 53, pp. 1084–87.

³¹ 31. Walter J. Chantry, *Signs of the Apostles* pp. 50–52.

(c) Therefore “the perfect” refers to the perfection or completion of Scripture-quality revelation, or the completion of Scripture.

In such an argument the initial assumption determines the conclusion. However, before this assumption can be made, it needs to be demonstrated from an inductive analysis of the New Testament texts on prophecy.³² Yet, to my knowledge, no such inductive demonstration of the Scripture-quality authority of New Testament congregational prophecy has been made.

Moreover, there are some other factors in the text of [1 Corinthians 13:8–13](#) that are hard to reconcile with Reymond’s position. The regular Old Testament usage of seeing “face to face” as an expression not just for seeing clearly but for *personally* seeing God (see above) remains unexplained. And the fact that Paul includes himself in the expressions “Then *we* shall see face to face” and “Then I shall know even as I have been known” make it difficult to view these as references to the time of the completion of Scripture. Does Paul really think that when the other apostles finally finish their contributions to the New Testament he will suddenly gain such a remarkable change in his knowledge that he will know as he has been known, and will go from seeing in a mirror dimly to seeing face to face?

In addition to the views of Reymond and Chantry, there have been other attempts to see “when the perfect comes” as some time before Christ’s return, but we will not treat them in detail here. Such views all break down at verse [12](#), where Paul implies that believers will see God “face to face” “when the perfect comes.” This cannot be said about the time suggested in any of these other proposals.

The proposal about the completion of the canon of New Testament Scripture (the group of writings that came to be included in the New Testament) also fails to fit Paul’s purpose in the context. If we take A.D. 90 as the approximate date of the writing of Revelation, the last New Testament book written, then the end of the writing of Scripture came about thirty-five years after Paul wrote [1 Corinthians](#) (about A.D. 55). But would it be persuasive to argue as follows: “We can be sure that love will never end, for we know that it will last more than thirty-five years”? This would hardly be a convincing argument. The context requires rather that Paul be contrasting this age with the age to come, and saying that love will endure into eternity.³³ In fact, we see a similar procedure elsewhere in [1 Corinthians](#). When Paul wants to demonstrate the eternal value of something, he does this by arguing that it will last beyond the day of the Lord’s return (cf, [1 Cor. 3:13–15](#); [15:51–58](#)). By contrast, prophecy and other gifts will not last beyond that day.

Finally, these proposals fail to find any support in the immediate context. Whereas Christ’s return is mentioned clearly in verse [12](#), no verse in this section mentions anything about the completion of Scripture or a collection of the books of the New Testament or the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church or the “maturity” of the church (whatever that means—is the church really mature even today?). All of these suggestions bring in new elements not found in the context to replace the one

³² 32. See chapter 53, pp. 1049–61, for a fuller discussion of the gift of prophecy; also Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*.

³³ 33. Some argue that faith and hope will not endure in heaven, so [1 Cor. 13:13](#) only means that faith and hope last until, not beyond, Christ’s return. However, if faith is dependence on God and trust in him, and if hope is a confident expectation of future blessings to be received from God, then there is no reason to think that we will cease to have faith and hope in heaven. (See Carson’s good discussion of faith, hope, and love as “eternally permanent virtues” in *Showing the Spirit* pp. 74–75.)

element—Christ’s return—which clearly is right there in the context already. In fact, Richard Gaffin, who himself holds that the gift of prophecy is not valid for today, nevertheless says that the “perfect” in verse 10 and the “then” in verse 12 “no doubt refer to the time of Christ’s return. The view that they describe the point at which the New Testament canon is completed cannot be made credible exegetically.”³⁴

Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes that the view that makes “when the perfect comes” equal the time of the completion of the New Testament encounters another difficulty:

It means that you and I, who have the Scriptures open before us, know much more than the apostle Paul of God’s truth....It means that we are altogether superior...even to the apostles themselves, including the apostle Paul! It means that we are now in a position in which...“we know, even as also we are known” by God...indeed, there is only one word to describe such a view, it is nonsense.³⁵

John Calvin, referring to 1 Corinthians 13:8–13, says, “It is stupid of people to make the whole of this discussion apply to the intervening time.”³⁶

2. Would the Continuation of Prophecy Today Challenge the Sufficiency of Scripture?

a. The Authority of the Gift of Prophecy: Those who take a “cessationist” view argue that once the last New Testament book was written (probably the book of Revelation around A.D. 90), there were to be no more “words of God” spoken or written in the church. This is especially relevant for the gift of prophecy, according to the cessationist position, because from that point on *Scripture* was the complete and sufficient source of God’s words for his people. To add any more words from continuing prophetic utterances would be, in effect, either to add to Scripture or to compete with Scripture. In both cases, the sufficiency of Scripture itself would be challenged, and, in practice, its unique authority in our lives compromised.

Now *if* New Testament congregational prophecy was like Old Testament prophecy and New Testament apostolic words in its authority, then this cessationist objection would indeed be true. *If* prophets today, for example, spoke words that we knew were the very words of God, then these words *would be* equal to Scripture in authority, and we *would be* obligated to write them down and add them to our Bibles whenever we heard them. But if we are convinced that God stopped causing Scripture to be written when the book of Revelation was completed, then we have to say that *this* kind of speech, uttering the very words of God, cannot happen today. And any claims to have “new” Scripture, “new” words of God, must be rejected as false.

This question is very important, because the claim that New Testament congregational prophecy had authority equal to Scripture is the basis of many cessationist arguments. Yet it must be noted that noncessationists themselves do not

³⁴ 34. Gaffin, *Perspectives* p. 109; cf. Max Turner, “Spiritual Gifts Then and Now,” *Vox Evangelica* 15 (1985), p. 38.

³⁵ 35. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Prove All Things* ed. by Christopher Catherwood (Eastbourne, England: Kingsway, 1985), pp. 32–33.

³⁶ 36. John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* trans. by J.W. Fraser, ed. by D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 281 (on 1 Cor. 13:10).

seem to view prophecy that way. George Mallone writes, “To my knowledge no noncessationist in the mainstream of Christianity claims that revelation today is equal with Scripture.”³⁷ Perhaps it would be good for those arguing against continuing prophecy today to give a more sympathetic hearing to the most responsible charismatic writers, simply for the purpose of being able to respond to something that charismatics *actually believe* (even if not always expressed in theologically precise form), instead of responding to something that cessationists say that charismatics believe or say that charismatics should believe.

Furthermore, aside from the question of current practice or belief, I have argued extensively elsewhere that ordinary congregational prophecy in New Testament churches did *not* have the authority of Scripture.³⁸ It was not spoken in words that were the very words of God, but rather in merely human words. And because it has this lesser authority, there is no reason to think that it will not continue in the church until Christ returns. It does not threaten or compete with Scripture in authority but is subject to Scripture, as well as to the mature judgment of the congregation.

b. The Question of Guidance: Another objection is sometimes raised at this point. Some will argue that even if those who use the gift of prophecy today *say* that it does not equal Scripture in authority, *in fact* it functions in their lives to compete with or even replace Scripture in giving guidance concerning God’s will. Thus, prophecy today, it is said, challenges the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture for guidance in our lives.

Here it must be admitted that many mistakes have been made in the history of the church. John MacArthur points to the way in which the idea of further revelations has given rise to many heretical movements in the church.³⁹

But here the question must be, Are abuses *necessary* to the functioning of the gift of prophecy? If we are to argue that mistakes and abuses of a gift make the gift itself invalid, then we would have to reject Bible teaching too (for many Bible teachers have taught error and started cults), and church administration as well (for many church leaders have led people astray), and so forth. The *abuse* of a gift does not mean that we must prohibit the *proper use* of the gift, unless it can be shown that there cannot be proper use—that *all* use has to be abuse.⁴⁰

³⁷ 37. George Mallone, ed., *Those Controversial Gifts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 21.

³⁸ 38. For further discussion of the authority of the gift of prophecy, see chapter 53, pp. 1049–61. See also Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*; Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*; D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* pp. 91–100; Graham Houston, *Prophecy: A Gift For Today?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1989). (Alternative views are noted in the discussion in chapter 53; see esp. the book by Richard Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*.)

³⁹ 39. John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* chapters 2–6; see esp. pp. 27ff. MacArthur has expanded his criticisms in an updated edition, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 47–84. A thoughtful and extensive critique of MacArthur is found in Rich Nathan, *A Response to Charismatic Chaos* (Anaheim, Calif.: Association of Vineyard Churches, 1993).

⁴⁰ 40. Some may object that prophecy has more potential for abuse than other gifts because the idea that God can reveal things to people today (in prophecies) inevitably leads to competition with the authority of Scripture. In response, three points can be

Moreover, specifically with respect to guidance, it is good to note how cautious many in the charismatic movement are about the use of prophecy to give specific guidance. Several quotations will illustrate this point.

Michael Harper (Church of England):

Prophecies which tell other people what they are to do—are to be regarded with great suspicion.⁴¹

Dennis and Rita Bennett (American Episcopalians):

We should also be careful of personal, directive prophecy, especially outside the ministry of a mature and submitted man of God. Unrestrained “personal prophecy” did much to undermine the movement of the Holy Spirit which began at the turn of the century....Christians are certainly given words for one another “in the Lord”...and such words can be most refreshing and helpful, but there must be a witness of the Spirit on the part of the person receiving the words, and extreme caution should be used in receiving any alleged directive or predictive prophecy. Never undertake any project simply because you were told to by presumed prophetic utterance or interpretation of tongues, or by a presumed word of wisdom, or knowledge. Never do something just because a friend comes to you and says: “The Lord told me to tell you to do thus and thus.” If the Lord has instructions for you, He will give you a witness in your own heart, in which case the words coming from a friend...will be a confirmation to what God *has already been* showing you. Your guidance must also agree with Scripture....⁴²

Donald Gee (Assemblies of God):

[There are] grave problems raised by the habit of giving and receiving personal “messages” of guidance through the gifts of the Spirit....The Bible gives a place for such direction from the Holy Spirit....But it must be kept in proportion. An examination of the Scriptures will show us that as a matter of fact the early Christians did *not* continually receive such voices from heaven.

made: (1) Teaching on the fallible nature of all contemporary prophecies has not been as extensive as needed to prevent abuse, especially at the popular level, among groups that allow prophecy today. Therefore there has been more misuse of prophecy than there should have been. Even where strong cautions have been proclaimed, there has seldom been an explanation of how prophecy can be from God but still not equal to God’s words in authority—that is, very few Pentecostal or charismatic writers have explained prophecy as a *human* report of something that God has spontaneously brought to mind (the view which I defend in chapter 53, pp. 1049–61). (However, see the helpful cautions from several charismatic writers in the following paragraphs in the text above.) (2) It is simply not true that teaching a congregation that prophecy must always be *subject* to Scripture inevitably leads people to exalt prophecies *above* Scripture. This will happen where such teaching is neglected, not where it is propagated. (3) If the Bible indeed teaches that prophecy can be expected to continue today in a form that does not challenge scriptural authority, then we are not free to reject it because we recognize a potential for abuse. (Other gifts have potential for abuse in other areas.) Rather, we should encourage the gift and do our best to guard against abuse.

⁴¹ 41. Michael Harper, *Prophecy: A Gift for the Body of Christ* (Plainhill, N.J.: Logos, 1964), p. 26.

⁴² 42. Dennis and Rita Bennett, *The Holy Spirit and You* p. 107.

In most cases they made their decisions by the use of what we often call “sanctified common-sense” and lived quite normal lives. Many of our errors where spiritual gifts are concerned arise when we want the extraordinary and exceptional to be made the frequent and habitual. Let all who develop excessive desire for “messages” through the gifts take warning from the wreckage of past generations as well as of contemporaries....The Holy Scriptures are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.⁴³

On the other hand, even among very Reformed cessationists, there is a willingness to admit some kind of continuing “illumination” by the Holy Spirit in believers’ lives. For example, Westminster Seminary professor Richard Gaffin says,

Often, too, what is seen as prophecy is actually a spontaneous, Spirit-worked application of Scripture, a more or less sudden grasp of the bearing that biblical teaching has on a particular situation or problem. All Christians need to be open to these more spontaneous workings of the Spirit.⁴⁴

And Robert Reymond defines *illumination* as “the Holy Spirit’s enabling of Christians generally to understand, to recall to mind, and to apply the Scriptures they have studied.”⁴⁵

But if these writers will allow for the present activity of the Holy Spirit enabling Christians to “understand” or “recall to mind” or “apply” or “grasp” the teachings of Scripture, then there does not seem to be such a great difference in principle between what they are *saying* and what many in the charismatic movement are *doing* (even though there will probably be some remaining differences over the precise way guidance functions—yet this is not so much a difference about prophecy as about guidance generally, and particularly the way guidance from Scripture relates to guidance from advice, counsel, conscience, circumstances, sermons, etc.). The larger point is that what Gaffin and Reymond here call “illumination,” the New Testament seems to call a “revelation,” and what they would call a spoken report of such illumination, the New Testament seems to call a “prophecy.”

So I wonder if there may be room for more joint theological reflection in this area. Charismatics need to realize that cessationists are skeptical about the scope and frequency of such “illumination,” whether it is right to call it New Testament prophecy, whether it really does have value for the church, and whether it should be sought after. And cessationists need to realize that their own highly developed and carefully formulated doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture in guidance is not usually shared or even understood by much of evangelicalism, including those in the charismatic movement. Nevertheless, perhaps the Reformed idea of “illumination” allows for what is happening in prophecy today, and may provide a way of understanding it that is not seen as challenging the sufficiency of Scripture.

What shall we conclude then about the relationship between the gift of prophecy and the sufficiency of Scripture? We must say that we appreciate the desire of the cessationists to protect the uniqueness of Scripture and not to allow anything to compete with the authority of Scripture in our lives. We also must be thankful for the desire of cessationists that Christians understand and follow sound principles of guidance in their daily lives, and not get off into an area of excessive subjectivism that

⁴³ 43. Donald Gee, *Spiritual Gifts in the Work of Ministry Today* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1963), pp. 51–52.

⁴⁴ 44. Gaffin, *Perspectives* p. 120.

⁴⁵ 45. Reymond, *What About . . . ?* pp. 28–29.

does not have the controls of Scripture attached to it. On the other hand, there is certainly a danger that comes with the cessationist viewpoint if it is wrong here. It is the very real danger of opposing something that God is doing in the church today and failing to give him glory for that work. God is jealous for his works and seeks glory from them for himself, and we must continually pray not only that he would keep us from endorsing error, but also that he would keep us from opposing something that is genuinely from him.

3. Were Miraculous Gifts Limited to the Apostles and Their Companions?

Another cessationist argument is that miraculous gifts were limited to the apostles and their close companions. Since I have discussed this argument at length in chapter 17, I will not repeat the discussion here.⁴⁶

4. Did Miraculous Gifts Only Accompany the Giving of New Scripture? Another objection is to say that miraculous gifts accompanied the giving of Scripture, and since there is no new Scripture given today, we should expect no new miracles today.

But in response to that it must be said that this is not the only purpose for miraculous gifts. As we noted in chapter 17, miracles have several other purposes in Scripture: (1) they authenticate the gospel message throughout the church age; (2) they give help to those in need, and thereby demonstrate God's mercy and love; (3) they equip people for ministry; and (4) they glorify God.⁴⁷

We should also note that not all miracles accompany the giving of additional Scripture. For example, the ministries of Elijah and Elisha were marked by several miracles in the Old Testament, but they wrote no books or sections of the Bible. In the New Testament, there were many occurrences of miracles that were not accompanied by the giving of Scripture. Both Stephen and Philip in the book of Acts worked miracles but wrote no Scripture. There were prophets who wrote no Scripture in Caesarea ([Acts 21:4](#)) and Tyre ([Acts 21:9–11](#)) and Rome ([Rom. 12:6](#)) and Thessalonica ([1 Thess. 5:20–21](#)) and Ephesus ([Eph. 4:11](#)) and the communities to which 1 John was written ([1 John 4:1–6](#)). There were apparently many miracles in the churches of Galatia ([Gal. 3:5](#)). There were many miraculous things occurring at Corinth ([1 Cor. 12:8–10](#)), but in [1 Corinthians 14:36](#) Paul denies that any Scripture has come forth from the Corinthian church.⁴⁸ And James expects that healing will occur at the hands of the elders in all the churches to which he writes (see [James 5:14–16](#)).

5. Is It a Historical Fact That Miraculous Gifts Ceased Early in the History of the Church? Some cessationists have argued that miraculous gifts in fact ceased when the apostles died, because the purpose of miracles was to give authentication to the apostles. For this reason, it is argued, there should be no miraculous gifts today. B.B. Warfield argued this extensively in his book, *Counterfeit Miracles*.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ 46. See chapter 17, pp. 361–68, for a discussion of the question of whether miraculous gifts were limited to the apostles and their close companions.

⁴⁷ 47. See chapter 17, pp. 359–61, for a discussion of these purposes for miracles.

⁴⁸ 48. See chapter 53, p. 1054, for a discussion of [1 Cor. 14:36](#).

⁴⁹ 49. London: Banner of Truth, 1972 (reprint of 1918 edition). It should be noted that Warfield's argument, though frequently quoted, is really a historical survey, not an analysis of biblical texts. Moreover, Warfield's purpose was not to refute any use of spiritual gifts among Christians like those in much of the charismatic movement

In response, it must be said first that the premise just stated is very doubtful on historical grounds. There is increasing historical evidence⁵⁰ that miraculous gifts were occurring throughout the history of the church in greater or lesser degree, even when exaggerated or evidently spurious claims are discounted. Healings and other kinds of miraculous answers to prayer are often recorded. There were also people claiming to be prophets throughout the history of the early church—the problem was that too often they misunderstood their gift, or others misunderstood it, so that their utterances were (mistakenly) treated like actual words of God. Sometimes they would be tolerated, and sometimes they were too much of a threat to the established leadership of the churches and they would begin splinter groups—tragically, no longer under the restraining and evaluating authority of the established churches. Then too, others may have had “revelations” given to them which they then did not express, or simply

today, whose doctrine (on all matters other than spiritual gifts) and whose church affiliation put them in the mainstream of evangelical Protestantism. Warfield rather was refuting the spurious claims to miracles which had come from some branches of Roman Catholicism at various periods in the history of the church, and from various heretical sects (Warfield includes discussion of the followers of Edward Irving [1792–1834], who strayed into eccentric teachings and was excommunicated from the Church of Scotland in 1833). It is open to question whether modern-day cessationists are right to claim Warfield’s support when opposing something which is far different in doctrine and life from that which Warfield himself opposed.

⁵⁰ 50. Warfield’s position has come in for criticism from recent evangelical studies: see Max Turner, “Spiritual Gifts Then and Now,” *Vox Evangelica* 15 (1985), pp. 41–43, with notes to other literature; Donald Bridge, *Signs and Wonders Today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), pp. 166–77; and Ronald A. Kydd, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendriksen, 1984). Significant evidence of miraculous gifts in early church history is found in Eusebius A. Stephanou, “The Charismata in the Early Church Fathers,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 21:2 (Summer, 1976), pp. 125–46.

A broad-ranging but popularly written study of the history of miraculous gifts in the church is found in Paul Thigpen, “Did the Power of the Spirit Ever Leave the Church?” *Charisma* 18:2 (Sept. 1992), pp. 20–28. Most recently, see Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Post-Biblical Miracles* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Academic Press, 1993); this is a revision and expansion of the author’s Ph.D. dissertation responding to the arguments of cessationists from Warfield to the present.

The argument from church history can be turned the other way by an analysis of events from about 1970 to the present. Church growth analysts tell us that Pentecostal and charismatic churches, which encourage miraculous gifts, are experiencing growth unprecedented in the history of the church. Fuller Seminary professor C. Peter Wagner says, “While back in 1945 Pentecostals/charismatics could count only sixteen million members worldwide, by 1975 they had grown to ninety-six million and then ten years later in 1985 they numbered an astounding 247 million. I am not aware of any non-political, non-militaristic voluntary association which has grown at that rate in all of human history” (“Exploring the Supernatural Dimensions of Church Growth,” *Global Church Growth* [Oct.-Dec., 1988], p. 3). (By way of comparison, if the world population was 5 billion, the 1985 figure of 247 million constituted 5 percent of the population of the world.)

included without comment in a prayer, or in a sermon or word of exhortation, or in the writing of a hymn or some devotional literature.⁵¹

It should also be clear that when Paul said, “When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away” (1 Cor. 13:10), he was not saying anything about the relative *frequency* of miraculous gifts in the history of the church. That would be subject to much variation depending on the spiritual maturity and vitality of the church in various periods, the degree to which these gifts were sought as a blessing or rejected as a heresy, the frequency with which the meetings of the church normally made provision for the exercise of these gifts, the degree to which the nature of these gifts was correctly understood, and, over all of this, the Holy Spirit’s sovereign work in distributing gifts to the church.

What Paul is speaking about, however, is the total and final abolition of these gifts that is to be brought about by divine initiative at the return of Christ. And he is saying that he thinks that until the time of the return of Christ these gifts will at least to some extent remain available for use, and the Holy Spirit will continue to distribute these gifts to people. Calvin notes the abundance of spiritual gifts in Paul’s day and then comments (on 1 Cor. 14:32):

Today we see our own slender resources, our poverty in fact; but this is undoubtedly the punishment we deserve, as the reward for our ingratitude. For God’s riches are not exhausted, nor has His liberality grown less; but we are not worthy of His largess, or capable of receiving all that He generously gives.⁵²

6. Are Miraculous Gifts Today the Same As the Miraculous Gifts in Scripture?

Yet another objection to the continuation of miracles today is to say that the alleged miracles today are not like the miracles in Scripture because they are far weaker and often are only partially effective. In response to this objection we must ask whether it really matters whether the miracles today are exactly as powerful as those that occurred at the time of the New Testament. For one thing, we have very little information about the kind of miracles done by ordinary Christians in various congregations, such as the Christians at Corinth or in the churches in Galatia.

⁵¹ 51. We must realize that unless people understand prophecy as the fallible report of something that God spontaneously brings to mind, it will be very difficult for the church to encourage or even tolerate it. If prophecy is indeed based on something God suddenly brings to mind, it would eventually be very easy for Christian prophets, whether for good or ill motives, to begin to claim not only that they had received a “revelation” from God or Christ, but also that they spoke with a divine authority like that of Scripture. This apparently happened, at least in Montanism (second century A.D.) and probably in many other cases as well. Of course, if these prophets began to promote heretical ideas, the reaction of the rest of the church would eventually be to drive them out altogether: someone who claims absolute divine authority would eventually be accepted or rejected; he could not be merely tolerated.

But along with this rejection of prophets who misunderstood their status there was perhaps also a rejection of the gift of prophecy altogether, so that a failure on the part of the church itself to understand the nature of the gift of prophecy might have been the cause of a fairly complete suppression of at least the public expression of the gift of prophecy in the church.

⁵² 52. John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* p. 305.

Moreover, although remarkable miracles done by Jesus are recorded in the gospels, when Jesus healed “every disease and every infirmity” (Matt. 9:35) this must have included many with less serious diseases. We must also ask what the expected benefit is for the objection that miracles today are not as powerful as those in Scripture. If today only three hundred are converted at an evangelistic meeting instead of the three thousand converted on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), shall we say that the speaker does not really have the gift of evangelism, since the gift did not operate as powerfully as it did with the apostles? Or if only 30 percent of the people we pray for regarding physical illness are fully healed instead of 100 percent in the life of Jesus or of the apostles, shall we say this is not the New Testament gift of healing?⁵³ We must remember that gifts can vary in strength and no gift is perfect in this age. But does that mean that we should stop using these gifts altogether, or oppose them where we see them functioning with some degree of effectiveness? Shall we not praise God if 300 are converted rather than three thousand, or if 30 percent are healed rather than 100 percent of those for whom we pray? Is not the work of the Lord being done? If the quantity is not as great as in New Testament times, then we may ask the Lord for more grace or mercy, but it does not seem appropriate to give up on the use of these gifts or to oppose those who do use them.

7. Is It Dangerous for a Church to Allow for the Possibility of Miraculous Gifts Today? A final objection from the cessationist position is to say that a church that emphasizes the use of miraculous gifts is in danger of becoming imbalanced, and will likely neglect other important things such as evangelism, sound doctrine, and moral purity of life.

To say that the use of miraculous gifts is “dangerous” is not by itself an adequate criticism, because some things that are *right* are dangerous, at least in some sense. Missionary work is dangerous. Driving a car is dangerous. If we define *dangerous* to

⁵³ 53. The figure of 30 percent is simply an example for illustrative purposes, but it is close to two recent tabulations concerning people who received prayer for healing. One tabulation is found in David C. Lewis, *Healing: Fiction, Fantasy, or Fact?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), an academic investigation of 1,890 people who attended one of John Wimber’s conferences in Harrogate, England, in 1986. The author is a social anthropologist who prepared a detailed questionnaire that people filled out during the conference, and then followed up some randomly selected cases several months later. Of 862 cases of prayer for physical healing, 32 percent (or 279) reported a “great deal” of healing or “total healing.” Another 26 percent (or 222) reported a “fair amount” of healing. The remaining 42 percent (or 366) reported “little” or “no healing” (pp. 21–22). Many case studies are reported in detail, in several instances with medical reports quoted at length. All the physical problems prayed for are listed in a detailed appendix (pp. 276–83). (These physical problems are distinguished from prayer for spiritual problems such as inner healing and deliverance, which are tabulated separately by Lewis.) The other tabulation is found in John Wimber, *Power Healing* p. 188, who says that, of people who received extended prayer for healing at his church, “During 1986 thirty-two percent of all people prayed for were completely healed, while overall eighty-six percent showed evidence of some significant healing.” (D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], p. 124, says, “Wimber is quite candid: he estimates that his ‘success rate’ is about 2 percent,” but Carson gives no documentation for this statement, and it is apparently incorrect in light of what Wimber has actually written.)

mean “something might go wrong,” then we can criticize *anything* that anybody might do as “dangerous,” and this just becomes an all-purpose criticism when there is no specific abuse to point to. A better approach with respect to spiritual gifts is to ask, “Are they being used in accordance with Scripture?” and “Are adequate steps being taken to guard against the dangers of abuse?”

Of course it is true that churches can become imbalanced, and some in fact have done so. But not all will, nor do they have to do so. Furthermore, since this argument is one based on actual results in the life of a church, it is also appropriate to ask, “Which churches in the world today have the most effective evangelism? Which have the most sacrificial giving among their members? Which in fact have the most emphasis on purity of life? Which have the deepest love for the Lord and for his Word?” It seems to me that it is difficult to answer these questions clearly, but I do not think that we can fairly say that those churches in the charismatic and Pentecostal movements *by and large* are *weaker* in these areas than other evangelical churches. In fact, in some cases they may be stronger in these areas. The point is simply that any argument that says that churches emphasizing miraculous gifts *will* become imbalanced is simply not proven in actual practice.

8. A Final Note: Cessationists and Charismatics Need Each Other. Finally, it can be argued that those in the charismatic and Pentecostal camps, and those in the cessationist camp (primarily Reformed and dispensational Christians) really need each other, and they would do well to appreciate each other more. The former tend to have more practical experience in the use of spiritual gifts and in vitality in worship that cessationists could benefit from, if they were willing to learn. On the other hand, Reformed and dispensational groups have traditionally been very strong in understanding of Christian doctrine and in deep and accurate understanding of the teachings of Scripture. Charismatic and Pentecostal groups could learn much from them if they would be willing to do so. But it certainly is not helpful to the church as a whole for both sides to think they can learn nothing from the other, or that they can gain no benefit from fellowship with each other.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Before reading this chapter, what spiritual gift or gifts did you think you had? Has your understanding of your own spiritual gift(s) changed after studying this chapter? In what way?
2. Explain how each of the spiritual gifts that you understand yourself to have is greater than what would have been known to most old covenant believers. Explain how each gift is a foretaste of some knowledge or ability you will have after Christ returns.
3. What can you do to stir up or strengthen those spiritual gifts in you that need strengthening? Are there some gifts that you have been given but have neglected? Why do you think you have neglected them? What could be done to stir up or rekindle them in you?
4. As you think about your own church, which spiritual gifts do you think are most effectively functioning at the present time? Which are most needed in your church? Is there anything you can do to help meet those needs?

5. What do you think could be done to help churches avoid having controversies, and even divisions, over the question of spiritual gifts? Are there tensions in your own church with regard to these questions today? If so, what can you do to help alleviate these tensions?
6. Do you think that some spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament ceased early in the history of the church, and are no longer valid for today? Has your opinion on this question changed as a result of reading this chapter?
7. In your viewpoint, would a church be healthier and more unified if it concentrated on a few gifts and used them carefully and well, or if it encouraged a multiplicity of different gifts, and allowed them to be used at many different times by many different people? If you answered with the latter option, what things might your church do to include a greater diversity and distribution in the use of spiritual gifts? What are some of the dangers that might accompany such widespread use, and how can they be guarded against?

SPECIAL TERMS

See the list at the end of the next chapter.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See the list at the end of the next chapter.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

1 Peter 4:10–11: *As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*

HYMN

“COME, THOU ALMIGHTY KING”

This is a trinitarian hymn in which the first verse is addressed to God the Father, the second to God the Son, and the third to God the Holy Spirit. The third verse is a request that the Holy Spirit would come and rule in our hearts, be ever-present among us, and dwell among us as the “Spirit of power.” The final verse is a hymn of praise to God “the great One in Three.” In the midst of a long discussion on spiritual gifts, it is good to refocus our attention on God himself, who is the giver of all good gifts, and whose glory is the goal of the use of every gift.

Come, thou almighty King, Help us thy name to sing,
Help us to praise:
Father, all glorious, O'er all victorious,
Come, and reign over us, Ancient of Days.

Come, thou incarnate Word, Gird on thy mighty sword,
Our prayer attend:
Come, and thy people bless, And give thy Word success;