



## God's Final Word

### ***Direct revelation ended with the New Testament***

With the meteoric rise of modern Pentecostalism and its claim to ongoing revelation it is hard not to ignore the challenges it puts before the traditional churches. Should we have prophets? Should we be speaking in tongues? Should we expect miracles? Indeed it is these very things that are being thrust forward as the ingredients of church growth and success.

And we have to ask: why are the Pentecostal churches growing and the traditional churches shrinking? Have we missed something? And where does the Bible say that tongues, prophecies and miracles have ceased from the church?

There are a number of passages in the New Testament which I believe help us to answer some of these questions, particularly on the matter of revelation. Let's begin with Hebrews 1:1-3:

*"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high."*

NKJV

To understand these verses we must take into account the main purpose of the writer of this book which was to convince his readers of the superiority of the New Covenant over against that of the Old. They were hankering after the "good old days" of Old Covenant practices. The apostle Paul had an ongoing battle with this throughout much of his ministry. So this wasn't unique to the Hebrew church.

In these first few verses of the book the writer gets straight to the heart of the issue: the matter of revelation. How does God speak to us today and how is this better than the way He spoke to the Old Testament church? In answering this question he makes a direct comparison between two different forms.

Old Testament revelation was "at various times", "in various ways" and by various "prophets". The key word here is "various". It came at various times beginning with Moses and arriving piecemeal over a thousand-year period (approximately). It came in various ways such as by visions, dreams, voices, a sheep's fleece, the Urim and Thummim etc. And it came by various prophets beginning with Moses at around 1500 BC and ending with Malachi at around 400 BC.

By contrast the writer describes New Testament revelation, i.e., the revelation of the "last days" (Acts 2:17) as God having spoken to us in a son.

Let's stop there a moment. I want to suggest that this is one of the most profound statements in the whole Bible and worthy of our meditation. The writer has just answered all of our questions concerning New Testament revelation. Why do I say that? Let's take a closer look.

The words "has spoken" in the Greek are in the aorist tense which can be illustrated by a full stop. It denotes completed action or something that has happened once and does not continue. This suggests that the speaking of God in Christ, either through Christ Himself or His apostles, is a completed action that terminates with the New Testament.

The main difference then between the Old and New Testament revelatory modes is the difference between a plurality of prophets, modes and portions on the one hand and the singularity of prophet, mode and portion on the other. And in case you are thinking that God has short changed the New Testament church, the writer goes on to describe who and what this "Son" is. He is, among other things, the *"brightness of His glory and the express image of His person"*.

John gives us a similar description of this revelation in the following passages.

*"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."*

John 1:14

Philip said to Him, *"Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us."* Jesus said to him, *"Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"* (John 14:8-9).

In both of these texts we see something of the uniqueness of the revelation of God in Christ. It is as if John were telling us that not even all of the Old Testament prophets put together could rival the utter clarity and transcendence of the revelation that Jesus provides us.

We conclude, then, that the Lord Jesus Christ is *the* prophet of the New Testament church who has given us a vastly superior revelation to anything the ancient church ever received through its various prophets and various modes. Jesus has met all of the New Testament church's prophetic needs and has rendered obsolete the dreams, visions and voices of the Old Testament dispensation.

Having answered the fundamental question concerning the nature of New Testament revelation we go on to explore exactly how this singular act of revelation was achieved and how it applies to the church of the last days.

We know that Jesus' entire public ministry was completed within three years. This was well and good for the church of Jesus' day but what about the rest of the church who didn't see and hear Him speak and weren't able to put their hands into His nail prints? To understand the mechanism of New Testament revelation, we turn to John 14:25-26: *"These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."*

Although these words were addressed specifically to the 11 (Paul came later) it guaranteed them a good memory of all that Jesus had taught them throughout His public ministry with the help of the Holy Spirit. And what better way to record this teaching than in writing; from which came the New Testament. Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit enabled His apostles and their associates to record the teachings and events of Jesus in a way that guaranteed their truth and accuracy right down to the very words used. This is called "verbal inspiration" and is a core doctrine of the Presbyterian Church.

We might feel at this stage that we have more than adequately answered the challenge put to us by modern non-cessationists (those who believe in ongoing revelation). But when we turn to the book of Acts and Paul's teaching on the charismata we find that new revelation was still coming thick and fast right up until the end of the apostolic period. For example, in the apostolic church we have prophets such as Agabus who prophesied a great famine that almost wiped out the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-28) and Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14 to seek the gift of prophecy.

So how do we explain this in the light of Hebrews 1:1-2? We turn to 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

*"Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be*

*done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."*

Here Paul tells us that prophecies and tongues and the supernatural gift of knowledge will fail when the "perfect" comes. The question is: what is this "perfect" that Paul is talking about and when will it be? Some commentators see it as the final return of the Lord Jesus Christ and verse 12 would seem to support that view. However the word rendered "perfect" by our translators can just as easily be rendered "complete". In fact, if we take into account the previous verse where Paul is talking about the "partial", it is more likely that he would contrast this with the "complete" rather than the "perfect".

There are several good reasons why we should interpret the "complete" as a reference to the completion of the New Testament canon of Scripture and the partial as Paul's word for what is essentially an Old Testament mode of revelation still operating in the church up until the end of the apostolic age. Let's consider them separately:

### ***Paul's reference to the partial:***

In verse 9 Paul refers to the supernatural gifts of tongues, prophecy and knowledge as partial. This reminds us of what the writer to Hebrews says about the nature of Old Testament revelation which came in parts: a part here and a part there, but was never complete. If this is true then it means that the Old Testament mode of various prophets, various modes and various parts persisted in the church up until the completion of the New Testament canon at which time the "partial" was no longer necessary.

### ***Paul's use of the childhood metaphor:***

In verse 11 Paul compares prophecy, tongue-speaking and supernatural knowledge with childhood and the coming of the "complete" with adulthood. This is not the only instance where Paul uses this metaphor. We also find it in Galatians 3:23-4:7 where he compares the church of the Old Testament as a child under the tutelage of the Mosaic law. This church comes of age in the "fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4) when "God sent forth his Son."

### ***Paul's use of the mirror metaphor:***

In verse 12 Paul goes on to describe tongues, prophecy and supernatural knowledge as looking into a dim mirror. We know that the mirrors of Paul's time were of polished brass and gave only a dim reflection. The "complete", on the other hand, is like a face to face encounter where we see others as clearly as they see us, or to use Paul's words, to know others as they know us. The question arises: is there any sense in which the completed canon of scripture gives us a face to face encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ?

The mirror metaphor is not about what Jesus actually looked like. If that were important God would have preserved an image or an inspired drawing of his face. But we do know that it was the divine character of Jesus that the apostles came face to face with and which they bequeathed to the future church in the Scriptures. And it is no overstatement to say that the full canon of Scripture including the books of the Old and New Testaments taken together do indeed provide us with this type of "face to face" encounter with the divine character.

In conclusion, we affirm along with the writer to the Hebrews and the apostle Paul, that the revelation of the completed canon of Scripture, especially the Old and New Testaments taken together, is actually far superior to the partial mode of prophecies, tongues and miracles. It is as superior as adulthood is to childhood, as a face to face encounter is to polished brass, and as the complete is to the partial.

