

We finished chapter 12 by noting that some gifts are 'greater' than others in terms of the contribution which they make to the profit and building up of the church. But before Paul moves us on to the direct comparison between tongues and prophecy which he makes in chapter 14, he first stresses that there is something which is supremely important – something which is 'yet-more', which is 'super-excellent' – without which the very greatest of spiritual gifts are of no value - something which, according to 8.1, always 'builds up' and which, unlike *any* of the spiritual gifts, is open to all. This 'something' is love!

The apostle knew that the Corinthians had gone badly astray, not only in over-valuing the gift of tongues in comparison with the other gifts, but in priding themselves on the whole range of their spiritual gifts. They envied those with supposedly more important gifts and despised those with supposedly lesser gifts. And so at the outset of our chapter, Paul makes it clear that, unless spiritual gifts are exercised in love for one another, they are worthless.

But there was more to it. As we have discovered, Paul was fully aware that – though there was no lack of spiritual gifts and knowledge at Corinth, 1.7 – there was a decided lack of love generally among the believers there – evidenced, for example, by some freely eating idol-food, in total disregard for the disastrous effects of this on others, and in the way that the rich wouldn't even wait for the poor to arrive before partaking of the church fellowship meal. Paul knew that it was the lack of love for one another which lay at the root of many of their problems – hence chapter 13.

Thankfully, the chapter lends itself to a nice, simple division :

O/H 1

Vv. 1-3 are concerned with the **absence** of love. Note in particular the words 'but have not love' in each verse.

Vv. 4-7 are concerned with the **evidence** of love. Paul speaks of love's outworking in the life of church – of some of love's characteristics and qualities.

Vv. 8-12 are concerned with the **permanence** of love. Love is the priority because it is permanent, whereas spiritual gifts (specifically prophecy, tongues and knowledge) are to disappear one day.

Verse 13 is concerned with the **pre-eminence** of love. For, if the end of chapter 12 teaches that there are some *gifts* which are 'greater' than other gifts, the end of chapter 13 teaches that there is one *grace* which is greater than other graces – that love reigns supreme among the graces.

V.1. Before describing in detail the 'still more excellent – the super-excellent – way' mentioned at the end of chapter 12 – which he does in vv. 4-7 – Paul first emphasises its crucial importance. For the most impressive gifts and actions count for nothing if they are used for self-glory and without regard for others, vv. 1-3.

Personally, I doubt that the words 'the tongues of men and of angels' refer *directly* to the spiritual gift of tongues. I note that, though Paul refers many times to that gift in the immediate context, he does not normally use, as here, the expression 'the tongues'. (14.22 is an exception.) I note also from his quote from Isaiah 28 in 14.21 that Paul is happy to use the word 'tongues' to describe normal human languages – 'In the law it is written: "With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me"'. So I take Paul to mean, 'Even if I could master and express every conceivable form of earthly and heavenly utterance'. I have read of one man, Apollonius Tyaneus, who claimed to understand and speak with the tongues of all men. We can only assume that Mr Tyaneus was more renowned for his linguistic skills than for his modesty! The Rabbis of NT days conjectured that the language of communication between the angels was Hebrew. Never having heard the angels converse, I wouldn't know – nor am I particularly interested. I suspect that Paul introduces the angels only as a hypothetical case – an extreme hypothetical case – much as he introduces the preaching of angels in Gal.1.8, 'If we, or an angel from heaven, should preach any gospel to you other than what we have preached to you ...'. I suspect, however, that Paul is alluding *indirectly* to the gift of tongues – because to speak in all the tongues – the languages, that is – of men (which clearly is the point) would certainly require the gift. Though the gift of tongues, together with the allied gift of interpretation, is mentioned last in each of the three lists in chapter 12, I suggest that he alludes to it first here – before prophecy, knowledge and faith in v.2 - because of the exaggerated importance which the Corinthians attached to it.

'I have become as sounding brass (ie resounding bronze) or a clanging cymbal', he says. The Corinthians would have readily understood the reference for Corinthian bronze was renowned for its quality and its excellence. Indeed, Paul may well be referring to idolatrous ceremonies and practices familiar to his readers - both gongs and cymbals being widely used by the cults of Dionysius and Cybele, the alleged mother of the gods. The '**booming**' noise of bronze gongs and the '**clanging**' of cymbals may well therefore have formed part of the regular pagan rites and processions at Corinth. Paul is saying, If the finest of utterances aren't communicated in love – so as to contribute to the profit of the church – they are, like these gongs and cymbals, mere empty noise without meaning or significance. Speaking in tongues – even, if it were possible, the tongues of angels – would be no better and accomplish no more.

V.2. The words 'all mysteries' refer to the great truths of God's purpose and counsels – to secret things which cannot be discovered by human reason. I take it that 'the gift of prophecy' was probably the means by which these mysteries were communicated. 'All knowledge' may well refer to the spiritual gift of knowledge – to knowledge given directly by God, as in 12.8 – 'for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit ... to another prophecy' – an explanation supported by the association of 'knowledge' here – as there – with the gift of prophecy. To 'have all knowledge' would therefore, I suppose, be to know potentially everything about everything – exceeding even Solomon's encyclopaedic range of knowledge, who 'spoke of trees, from the cedar tree of Lebanon even to the hyssop that springs out of the wall; he spoke also of animals, of birds, of creeping things, and of fish', 1 Kings 4.33. Paul is saying that, even if he was the recipient of all the revelations and knowledge which God ever chose to make known, without love he would be nothing. 'And to have all faith' – the gift of wonder-working faith, that is, as mentioned in 12.9 – faith of the sort which Jesus described on at least two occasions – 'If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove', Matt 17.20, and 'Verily I say to you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but even if you shall say to this mountain, Be removed, and be cast into the sea, it shall be done', 21.21. 'Faith so as to remove' – the (present) tense serving to enhance the achievement still further – faith to go on removing mountains – to remove mountain after mountain.

V.3. The word translated, 'bestow', is literally 'to feed with small mouthfuls'. That is, 'if I break down all my possessions and dole them out – distribute them – in small portions so as to benefit as many as possible ...it profits me nothing'. Nobody can give more than all. The rich young ruler who came to Jesus refused to do it. Even the converted chief tax-collector (Zaccheaus) gave only half. But, Paul warns, it is all too possible to have a *lavish hand* without having a *loving heart*. To have a wide palm without having a warm heart. And, he says, not only to give all my property to others but even to give up my body in self-sacrifice for others. That is, if you like, to both *dole out my bounty* and *deliver up my body*. To deliver up my body to death – and then not merely to die – but to willingly die a horrific death in the flames. Possibly Paul had in mind the then-famous incident of an Indian fanatic who, in the time of Caesar Augustus, had burned himself alive at Athens. We know that 'the tomb of the Indian' as it was called was visible in Athens in Paul's time – it was one of the sights shown to strangers. The tomb bore the inscription: 'Zarmochegas the Indian from Bargaosa, according to the ancient customs of India, made himself immortal and lies here'. Paul had been to Athens sometime before writing to the Corinthians and may well have seen the tomb then.

Let's briefly summarise vv.1-3. No matter what I **say**, v.1 ... no matter what I **have** – whether prophecy, knowledge or faith, v.2 ... no matter what I **do** – whether I dole out or deliver up, v.3 'Without love', Paul says, v.1, '**what do I become?** – 'nothing', because that is what all my noise achieves. 'Without love', Paul says, v.2, '**what am I?** – 'nothing' – I am of no value at all. 'Without love', Paul says, v.3, '**what do I gain?**', – 'nothing' – absolutely nothing. For love is indispensable. And for Malcolm, the point made is sobering – to say the least – that I can have the most wonderful speech in my *mouth* – have a complete understanding of God's mysteries and truth in my *mind* – have great resources of faith in my *heart* – and have to my credit the most sacrificial of actions in my *conduct* and – because I don't love – I **achieve** nothing, I **am** nothing and I **am benefited** nothing.

In **vv.4-7**, Paul personifies love. In all, he lists 15 qualities and properties of love - seven positive and eight negative. In one sense, here is *love's portrait* and, in another, here is *love's lifestyle*. In this section Paul depicts love as a lady – hence 'does not seek *her* own things', v.5 lit. I don't suppose for a moment that Paul aims to give a *full* exposition of *all* of love's features. In all likelihood, he has selected those qualities which contrast starkly with the character of the Corinthians and in particular with the way in which they were exercising their gifts. Working back from Paul's portrait of love, we may gather that the Corinthians were – quick to flare up, unkind, envious, boastful, proud, rude, selfish, irritable, unforgiving, finding pleasure in people's failures rather than in that which is true, ready to broadcast the faults of others, suspicious and quick to write others off. Ouch!

The first part of **v.4** opens with a couplet – 'longsuffering and kind'. These qualities, in particular, are God-like – for, as Paul assured the Romans, God is 'rich' in both – 'do you despise the riches of His goodness (kindness), forbearance, and longsuffering', Rom.2.4 – He both withholds His anger (*so richly deserved*) and exercises His kindness (*altogether undeserved*). Longsuffering indicates self-restraint – not rushing to punish or quickly to visit retribution on someone who has offended me. Love has a long fuse – but how long is mine? In contrast to longsuffering, kindness isn't passive – it's active. Love is amiable and considerate, doing good to all.

From the second part of v.4 to the first part of v.6, Paul lists eight negative features of love.

V.4b. Love isn't jealous (envies not). We tend to distinguish the vices of jealousy and envy – seeing envy as wishing to deprive others of what they have - and jealousy as desiring to have the same for ourselves as others have. Paul probably includes both ideas in his word. Love doesn't resent the blessings, prosperity and success of others. Moses would provide a good example from the OT, and John the Baptist from the NT – 'Moses said to him, Do you envy for my sake? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets', Numb 11.26-30; 'they came to John, and said to him, Rabbi, he that was with you beyond Jordan, to whom you bare witness, behold, the same baptizes, and all men come to him. John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him

from heaven ...He must increase, but I must decrease', John 3.26-31. Remember 12.26 – far from envying the honour given to another member of the body, love rejoices with him.

Love doesn't blow her own trumpet (vaunts not herself) – love doesn't brag or parade herself to win the admiration and the applause of others.

Love isn't puffed up – as we noted when considering chapter 8, the word is derived from that for a bellows. Love isn't inflated with a sense of its own importance. This was, as we noted, the Corinthians' besetting sin – we find six of the seven occurrences of the word in the New Testament right here in 1 Corinthians – of which this is the last. (See 4.6,18,19; 5.2; 8.1; 12.4.) But love isn't guilty of *inward pride* any more than it is of *outward show*.

V.5. Love doesn't act in an unbecoming – an unseemly or improper - manner. love does nothing of which it ever needs to be ashamed. In particular, it is never ill-mannered or rude – it isn't self-assertive or arrogant. It never stoops to perform mean and despicable actions. Love is marked by courtesy and tact, by consideration and respect for others.

Love isn't concerned with herself ('doesn't seek her own'). Love doesn't put herself first. Not only doesn't she envy and covet that which belongs to others, v.4 - she is always ready to give up what is her own for others. Like Paul, she doesn't seek her own advantage but that of others, 10.33. And like his Lord, she looks not only to her own interests but to the interests of others, Phil.2.4.

Love doesn't allow herself to be provoked. She doesn't get irritated when she suffers injury at the hands of others. She doesn't allow such things to make her sharp and bitter. If she doesn't blow her own trumpet ('vaunts' not herself, v. 4), neither does she blow her top!

Love doesn't keep a note of the wrongs done to her (thinks no evil). Paul employs a well-known accounting term. When love suffers wrong, she doesn't enter it in a ledger – she doesn't put it down against the account of the offender with a view to paying it back – perhaps with a high rate of interest – at the earliest opportunity. Love would never know when her brother has sinned against her seven times – let alone 70 x 7!

V.6. Love doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness (lit). She doesn't find pleasure in anything which doesn't conform to the standard of what is right. In particular, love doesn't get any smug sense of satisfaction over the errors and bad actions of others – she doesn't triumph and gloat over their falls and failures. And, with an eye again to 12.26, love rejoices at the *blessings* and success of others – not at their *sins*. On the contrary, as Paul moves from love's negative features to some of love's positive features, love rejoices in all that is true.

V.7. Love 'bears' all things – the word is derived from that for a roof – and its meaning here isn't certain. On the one hand, it could mean to 'bear' – as a roof would in the ancient world. The idea would then be of bearing injuries inflicted by others without resentment or, just possibly, to bear the infirmities of the weak, Rom.15.1, and the burdens of fellow Christians, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ, Gal. 6.2. On the other hand, and more likely, the picture may be that of the roof 'covering' what is underneath. Paul's point would then be that love hides the faults of others – she is more disposed to conceal some ugly action than she is to expose it by gossip. 'I never repeat gossip, so listen carefully'. Perhaps Paul has the saying of Solomon in his mind, 'Love covers all sins (draws a veil over all wrongdoing)', Prov. 10.12 – quoted by Peter, 1 Pet.4.8. Love acts like Shem and Japheth, the two sons of Noah, who, in contrast to their younger brother Ham, rushed to screen the nakedness and shame of their father, Gen 9.20-24. Love spreads her mantle over the wrongs of others.

Love believes all things. Not that love is gullible or naïve. But love is always eager to believe good of others. She always puts the best possible construction on her neighbour's words and actions. She is always willing to give others the benefit of the doubt.

Love hopes all things. As love *believes* the best, so she *hopes* the best. Even when hard facts prove beyond doubt that others are at fault – and it's therefore no longer possible to 'believe' the best of them – love will 'hope' the best of them – that they will do better in the future – that they will be victorious where they have been defeated – that they will be good where they have been bad. For love persists in hoping and expecting the best of others.

And love endures all things. Even when love's hopes of others have been dashed and love has met with many sad disappointments, she *doesn't easily give up*. Love doesn't readily quit or walk away. Love will hang on and wait – not discouraged by the repeated failures of others. And why? Simply because love is love.

Here then in chapter 13 are the various manifestations of love in the life of the church – to stand alongside the various manifestations of spiritual gifts in the life of the church with which Paul deals on either side – both in chapter 12 and chapter 14.

We are left to imagine the tremendous difference which these features of love would have made in the first century church at Corinth – and the tremendous difference which, if fully applied by us all, they would make in Florida or Cardiff today.

In **vv. 8-12** Paul moves on from the evidence of love to the permanence of love.

V.8 adds one final characteristic of love – but a characteristic very different to those listed in vv.4-7. The features in vv.4-7 are meant to be displayed by believers. But here is one characteristic of love which isn't for the saints to demonstrate. The apostle introduces this characteristic to provide a marked contrast to the spiritual gifts of which the Corinthians were so proud. Love never 'falls' lit. – never fails – never comes to an end – never ceases to exist.

But if love never comes to an end, spiritual gifts do. They serve only a temporary purpose. Note that all-important 'But' at the beginning of the second sentence. Both prophecy and 'knowledge' – which may well be identified with the gift of knowledge, 12.8 – seen again, as in chapter 12, in company with the gifts of prophecy and tongues – both prophecy and 'knowledge' will be 'done away' – will be reduced to inactivity, put out of action. And tongues too will cease to function.

If in vv.1-2, Paul asserts that tongues, prophecy and knowledge have no value without love – here he asserts that, even though exercised in and with love, at some point they will in any case cease to operate.

In **vv. 9-10**, Paul provides the reason why knowledge and prophecy will come to an end. Although ranking among the more important of the gifts, they are at best partial and incomplete. And that which is fragmentary and partial will be done away when that which is perfect – that which is complete and whole, with nothing left out – comes. It may be worth noting that Paul distinguishes between prophecy and knowledge on the one hand, and tongues on the other. As far as prophecy and knowledge are concerned, because they are only 'in-part' revelations of God and His truth, they will one day be superseded and replaced by that which is complete – they will be 'done away'. Paul doesn't say the same about tongues because, unlike with the gifts of prophecy and knowledge, the gift of tongues isn't concerned with the revelation of God and His truth – and cannot therefore be replaced by some form of complete version. Tongues will cease however – because, in common with prophecy and knowledge – they have only a temporary purpose and value.

Vv.11-12 provide two simple illustrations of what happens when that which is perfect and complete takes over from that which is 'in part'. Both illustrations hinge on words of timing – v.11 is 'when ... but when' – v.12 is 'now ... but then'.

V.11 refers to the transition and progress from childhood to manhood. 'I used to talk, used to think, used to reason like a child', Paul is saying, 'but no longer. When I became a man, I had no urge – no desire – to become a child again, using child-like words and possessing a child's understanding (Some faint allusion to prophesy and knowledge?). I had outgrown these'. In like manner, when that which is 'complete' is come, we will have no desire to go back to what was only partial.

V12a. Corinth was famous for the manufacture of metallic mirrors, both of polished silver and bronze. This provides Paul with his second illustration. It is interesting to note that the only other time in any of his letters which we still possess when Paul makes mention of 'a mirror' is in his second letter to the Corinthians - speaking in 3.18 of Christians now beholding in a mirror the glory of Lord.

But, because the mirrors were made of polished metal, the image they reflected was imperfect - inevitably blurred and obscure. The image was unclear, it was seen 'dimly' – 'in an enigma' (lit). In the same way, the understanding of God and His things conveyed by means of the gifts of prophecy and knowledge was at best imperfect. Our present knowledge, acquired through prophecy and the gift of knowledge, Paul says, is like looking at a blurred reflection in a mirror in contrast to seeing directly – face to face.

When Paul contrasted seeing clearly with seeing through a mirror obscurely, he may well have had in mind the teaching of the Rabbis. In Numb. 12.6-8, God 'said, 'Hear now My words: "If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings (Septuagint = 'in an enigma')'". On the strength of these verses the Rabbis claimed, 'All the prophets looked through a mirror, which did not give light, Moses our master looked through a mirror that gave light'. Paul could well be saying that, although undoubtedly there was a great difference between Moses and the rest of the prophets – with the prophets receiving revelations indirectly through visions and dreams, but with God speaking directly to Moses – in the language of Numb. 12.8 'mouth to mouth' and not 'in an enigma' – there will be a far greater difference between the clearest views of God and His things now given through the gifts of prophecy and knowledge in the church, and the perfect clarity to be enjoyed when that which is 'complete' comes – 'not in an enigma' – the words used in Numb. 12.

Picking up again the words at the beginning of v.9 – 'we know in part' – Paul now in the latter part of v.12 contrasts the partial knowledge of his day with the thorough and complete knowledge to be enjoyed when that which is perfect and complete comes. 'Then I shall fully/thoroughly know, even as I am fully/thoroughly known' – presumably in the same way – although not of course to the same extent – as God knows me now. 'Then I shall fully know - directly and intuitively - and not through some indirect channel of revelation.'

As I understand it, **v.13** stands separate to vv.8-12. That is, in contrast with the future state spoken of in verses 10 and 12, the 'now' of v.13 refers to the present. Love is not only to be preferred to any - and all - spiritual gifts – it is greater than any - and all - other spiritual graces. If Paul stresses the *permanency* of love when contrasting her with the spiritual gifts of tongues, prophecy and knowledge, he stresses the *supremacy* of love when comparing her with the other spiritual graces of faith and hope. As I understand it, the point is not that love outlasts faith and hope – as it does tongues, prophecy and knowledge – but that it outranks and outshines them. Nor is this surprising for,

properly speaking, love alone is divine. God doesn't believe and He doesn't hope – but He certainly does love. And how!

14.1. 'I have then pointed you', Paul is saying, 'in the direction of the super-excellent 'way', 12.31 – it is the way of love. Pursue this way and then – but only then – fired by a concern for the wellbeing of others – as a church eagerly desire those spiritual gifts which will best promote their spiritual interests.'

Fine, you say, but come on, what then does Malcolm make of 'that which is perfect/complete' in v.10? When did Paul envisage believers seeing 'face to face' – and of knowing fully even as they are fully known, v.12? Or, to put it more bluntly, do verses 8-12 speak of the completed canon of scripture or the future heavenly state?

I wouldn't dare to be dogmatic. But I will venture my opinion.

I suggest that we must begin by putting ourselves in Paul's situation – that is, we must look through his eyes and imagine that we are back with him at the time he was writing.

We know that Paul was familiar with the idea of a completed canon of scripture – after all, he possessed one – we call it the Old Testament – and we know that he regarded it as inspired by God in every detail, 2 Tim.3.16-17. Clearly there had been a point of time when the last Old Testament book had been added and the OT canon completed. We know too that, because he was an apostle, he regarded his writings as carrying divine authority – that the things which he wrote to the churches were to be acknowledged as the very commandments of the Lord Himself, 14.37 – just as Peter also classed Paul's writings along with the 'other scriptures', 2 Pet 3.16.

I conclude therefore that Paul would not have had any difficulty in principle in believing that the day would come when there would be such a thing as the completed canon of New Testament writings – **if** he had been confident that there would be a church period extending beyond the apostolic days when the books of the New Testament could be collected together and the New Testament canon recognised as complete – 'perfect' if you like. Or alternatively, of course, if Paul had himself lived over 300 years later and known of the existence of the New Testament canon as we recognise it today – the whole 27 New Testament books being listed as part of the canon for the first time by Athanasius in AD 367.

But Paul didn't live 300 years later! And it is highly questionable whether Paul envisaged a church period extending beyond the days of the apostles and therefore highly questionable whether he would have imagined such a thing as a completed New Testament.

It is clear that Paul believed that it was possible – though by no means certain – that the Lord would return in his own lifetime. Not that He necessarily would. On the one hand, he could say, 'Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed', 15.51 and 'this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord', 1 Thess 4. 15 – on the other, 'knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus', 2 Cor. 4.14. I see no reason to believe that Paul foresaw a lengthy earthly programme for the church beyond the apostolic era. As an aside, we should be clear that 'the last days' of which Paul spoke in 2 Tim 3.1-9 had already begun. The men whose characters he described in verses 2-9 were already present – hence his injunction to Timothy personally, 'from such turn away!', v.5. Again, in contrast to the 'evil men and seducers' who 'will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived', he tells Timothy, 'you must continue in the things which you have learned', vv.13-14.

I see no reason to believe, I say, that Paul foresaw an earthly programme for the church beyond the apostolic era – and still less that he foresaw that there would be many future generations of Christians who would possess a completed canon of the NT – which canon we know was to include, for example, the book of the Revelation - written some 40 years after Paul dictated 1 Corinthians.

It seems to me therefore highly unlikely that Paul meant – or could have expected the saints at Corinth to understand – that there would be a time in the history of the church when a completed canon of scripture would 'come' and, with its coming, make redundant the special gifts of tongues, prophecy and knowledge.

You will gather that I believe that both the apostle and his original readers understood the passage to refer to the perfection and completeness of the future heavenly state.

I don't suppose that we can altogether rule out the possibility that Paul's words contained a depth of meaning which goes beyond what the Corinthians – and even Paul himself – understood by them. That is, that the Holy Spirit was indicating to future generations of Christians through Paul's words that the completed canon of scripture would displace the spectacular gifts, and that love would outlive them, even on earth, by at least 1900 years. That is, that Paul's words could, with the passing of time, be understood to have a second and deeper meaning.

But I very much doubt it. I rejoice in the sufficiency and perfection of scripture, but I would find it difficult to equate the expressions 'then we shall see face to face' and 'then I shall fully know as I am fully known' with our present experience. The Jews taught that *at the resurrection*, 'the children of men shall attain to perfect knowledge'. I guess that Paul was teaching much the same.

The one thing about which we can have complete confidence is that, when he wrote, Paul's immediate purpose was to convince the Corinthians that these impressive gifts of theirs were temporary and that love was more important than any and all of the gifts. And this he most certainly achieved.

But if 1Corinthians 13 *doesn't* teach that the gifts of tongues and prophecy were to cease when the New Testament writings were completed, does this mean that these gifts still exist today? I have several reasons for seriously doubting this.

First, we will note in chapter 14 at least one critical difference between (i) the exercise of the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation of tongues in first century Corinth, and (ii) what often passes for the exercise of these gifts today. Second, it seems apparent that the teaching of the New Testament prophets (along with the teaching of the apostles) comprised the foundation of the 'household of God' – viz. the church, Eph. 2.19-21; 3.5. It goes without saying that we live today in the 'under construction' period rather than the foundation period of the church. Third, prophesying and speaking in tongues stood alongside the gifts of apostolic ministry, healing and miracle working, 1 Cor.12.8-10, 28.

It seems clear from scripture that men exercised healing and miracle-working powers only at three great epochs of revelation – namely, the days of Moses and his immediate successor, the days of Elijah and his immediate successor, and the days when the Lord Jesus and His apostles were here.

Scanning the Bible very briefly – as far as we know, no miraculous powers were given to any man before Moses! No miracles were worked, for example, by Abraham the man of faith or by godly Joseph.

Then there came a positive flurry of supernatural activity in the days of Moses and those of his successor, Joshua – from the plagues of Egypt to the miraculous provision for the nation in the wilderness – to the sun standing still.

Such extraordinary signs ceased then until the days of Elijah, some 600 years later. Many were the miracles which cluster around the names of Elijah and Elisha – including raising the dead, making an axe head to swim, bringing fire from heaven on both altars and men etc.

And then, again, no men with miraculous powers appeared until our Lord Himself some 900 years later. Of John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets and filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb, Luke 1.15, it was said, 'John indeed did no sign', John 10.41.

The breaking in of miracle-working powers coincided with critical points in God's revelation of Himself to men. 'The law was given through Moses', John 1.17. Elijah and Elisha can be said to have introduced the prophetic era in a distinctive sense – coming in advance of the great writing prophets of the Old Testament, with their 'Thus says the Lord'.

Miraculous signs were needed to confirm that these men were indeed God's messengers. That is, the burst of miracles vindicated the messenger and accredited his message.

Consider Moses, for example. When he was concerned that the people would not believe his message, God gave him signs to perform, Exod.4.1-9. Stephen reported that Moses led Israel out of bondage 'doing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea and in the desert for 40 years', Acts 7.36.

Consider Elijah. His raising of the son of the widow of the Zarephath caused her to acknowledge, 'now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth', 1 Kings 17.24. That is, the sign acted as his credentials to be God's messenger and also served to confirm the truth of his message.

God had given evidence therefore that both the law and the prophets represented revelations from Him.

But both Moses and Elijah had to take a back seat when the Lord Jesus came, Matt. 17.3-5 - note the emphasis on revelation ('Hear Him') which we find on the Mount of Transfiguration.

The Lord Jesus had come to reveal the gospel – described as 'so great a salvation', Heb. 2.3. The credentials which He and His apostles offered were many mighty and impressive miracles; e.g. Matt 11.2 - 6; John 3.2; 10.37 - 38; Acts 2.22, 43; 14.3; Romans 15.18 - 19; 2 Corinthians 12.11 - 12; Hebrews 2.3 - 4.

But miraculous signs of this kind do not to be repeated indefinitely to demonstrate that the gospel represents a fresh revelation from God, any more than Moses' miraculous signs needed to be repeated indefinitely to demonstrate that the law represented a revelation from God.

[Based substantially on the notes which have been published in Precious Seed during 2002 and 2003.]

Note on 'that which is complete' and Colossians 1.24-26

On the strength of Colossians 1.24-26, some have argued that Paul regarded his ministry as effectively completing the New Testament - and that he therefore did envisage a completed canon. The passage speaks of Christ's 'body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints'.

A key question is 'what did the apostle mean by 'fulfil the word of God'?'

Did he mean that he was completing 'the word of God' by his teaching concerning the 'mystery' of the church – leaving others (as for example the apostle John) only to expand on what he had already revealed? Paul's use of the same verb here translated 'fulfil' in verse 24, 'fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ' can probably be pleaded in favour of this interpretation.

Or did he mean that he was charged (as a steward) with preaching the gospel to its fullest extent? Compare 'from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ (lit. to have fulfilled the gospel of Christ)', Rom. 15.19.

Or did he mean that he fulfilled the word of God in that he carried out its full design and made it known in its full scope? – namely, in preaching the gospel in all its fullness to the gentiles; cf. Col.1.23. In favour of the second and third interpretations is the fact that the passage (Col.1.24-26) is sandwiched between explicit references to his preaching, Col. 1.23, 28.

Even if we adopt the first interpretation, this seems to me to fall far short of proving that the apostle believed there should be a completed canon of the New Testament for future generations of Christians to prize.

Healing and miracle-working powers

As far as we know, no miraculous powers were given to any man before Moses! No miracles were worked, for example, by Abraham the man of faith or by godly Joseph.

There was a positive flurry of supernatural activity in the days of Moses - from the plagues of Egypt to the miraculous provision for the nation in the wilderness.

Such extraordinary signs ceased then until the days of Elijah, some 600 years later. Many were the miracles which cluster around the names of Elijah and Elisha - including raising the dead, making an axe head to swim, bringing fire from heaven on both altars and men etc.

Then again, no men with miraculous powers appeared until our Lord Himself some 900 years later. Of John the baptist, the greatest of the prophets and filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb, Luke 1.15, it was said, "John indeed did no sign", John 10.41.

The breaking in of miracle-working powers coincided with critical points in God's revelation of Himself to men. 'The law was given through Moses', John 1.17. Elijah and Elisha can be said to have introduced the prophetic era in a distinctive sense - coming in advance of the writing prophets of the Old Testament. Miraculous signs were needed to confirm that these men were indeed God's messengers. That is, the burst of miracles vindicated the messenger and accredited his message.

Consider Moses, for example. When he was concerned that the people would not believe his message, God gave him signs to perform, Exod.4.1-9. Stephen reported that Moses led Israel out of bondage "doing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea and in the desert for 40 years", Acts 7.36.

Consider Elijah. His raising of the son of the widow of the Zarephath caused her to acknowledge, "now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in my mouth is truth", 1 Kings 17.24. That is, the sign acted as his credentials to be God's messenger and also served to confirm the truth of his message.

God had given evidence therefore that both the law and the prophets represented revelations from Him. But both Moses and Elijah had to take a back seat when the Lord Jesus came, Matt. 17.3-5 - note the emphasis on revelation ('Hear Him') which we find on the Mount of Transfiguration. The Lord Jesus had come to reveal the gospel - described as 'so great a salvation', Heb. 2.3. The credentials which He and His apostles offered were many mighty and impressive miracles; e.g. Matt 11.2 - 6; John 3.2; 10.37 - 38; Acts 2.22, 43; 14.3; Romans 15.18 - 19; 2 Corinthians 12.11 - 12; Hebrews 2.3 - 4.

But miraculous signs of this kind do not to be repeated indefinitely to demonstrate that the gospel represents a fresh revelation from God, any more than Moses' miraculous signs needed to be repeated indefinitely to demonstrate that the law represented a revelation from God.