

# **BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #140:**

## **THE TEMPORARY VERSUS THE TIMELESS**

**By John Temples**

Modern-day churches of Christ pride themselves on restoring the first century church and adhering to its Biblical pattern. Yet the more you read and study the New Testament, the more you realize that there were several offices, conditions, or practices in the early church that we don't have today. Examples:

- Apostles and prophets
- Miracles such as tongue speaking
- Casting out of demons
- Holy kisses
- Church elders anointing sick people with oil

So how can we say we are “doing Christianity” exactly the same way as the early Christians did it? The usual (and correct) answer is that the things listed above were temporary and part of the “start-up” process; in our day, we have only the permanent parts of Christianity. Elders and deacons, we say, were intended by God to guide congregations in every generation; apostles and prophets were needed only in the beginning. Miracles, we affirm, were needed to get the church up and running, but passed away when the church was established.

But how do we know which things or practices mentioned in the New Testament were temporary and which were intended to be permanent? Did some church council in the Middle Ages make such a determination? Did time, cultural factors, or apostasy cause some things to fall by the wayside?

Good questions, and there are logical and Scriptural answers. In general, a first-century church office or situation can be labeled as temporary if:

- It is said or implied in Scripture to be temporary.
- The need for it was temporary; i.e., it was needed only for “start-up.”
- It dealt with or was based on a local custom or temporary situation.
- We have no Biblical instructions on how to continue it.

Let's examine each of these.

## FIRST: A THING IS TEMPORARY WHEN IT IS SAID TO BE SO

Exhibit A under this heading is speaking in tongues. In the Bible, a tongue was a known language, not ecstatic gibberish. In Acts 2 we read the account of the establishment of the church in Jerusalem in AD 33. The apostles "spoke in tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4). Verse 8 makes it clear that the apostles were not just spouting unintelligible sounds; rather, the audience heard them speak in their native languages.

Christ had previously charged the apostles with going into all the world and preaching the gospel to all mankind, Matthew 28:18-20. To accomplish that, they needed miraculous help, because there were many different languages in use throughout the world. Therefore, the Holy Spirit miraculously enabled the apostles to instantly be fluent in any language they might encounter.

But read 1 Corinthians 13:8-10: "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." Many church members at Corinth had been given the gift of speaking in other languages, a gift which could be imparted by the laying on of an apostle's hands (Acts 8:18). The Corinthians had become enthralled with this gift (it was "flashy") and were even looking down on others who did not have such an ability. Verses 8-10 are actually a rebuke of this unloving spirit. Paul says in effect, "Hey, folks--this gift of tongues, with which you are so enamored, will soon pass away. You had better seek and cultivate the lasting elements of church life, such as love."

When was the gift of tongues to pass away? "When that which is perfect has come" (verse 10). What is "that which is perfect"? Many people assume it refers to the Lord at His second coming; but such is not correct. The word "that" is neuter gender, and therefore refers to a thing, not a person. Paul evidently meant the completed Scriptures. When the written Bible was complete, it could easily be translated into any language; hence, the ability to speak in tongues was no longer needed, and passed away. (God's "modus operandi" has always been to get

things started by miracle, but then to allow them to operate and reproduce by natural means.) Proof that the Scriptures were meant is seen in the fact that by the end of the first century, the Bible was finished and miraculous gifts disappeared.

## SECOND: A THING IS TEMPORARY WHEN THE NEED FOR IT WAS TEMPORARY

What we just said about tongue-speaking would fall under this heading also. Indeed, all the miraculous gifts would. Notice that 1 Corinthians 13:8 also mentions prophecies (miraculously delivered revelation) and supernatural, inspired knowledge as temporary things.

Another passage that affirms this principle is Ephesians 4:11-16: “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ — from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

Notice that Ephesians 4:11-16 and 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 are parallel passages. They deal with the same subject (the temporary nature of miraculous endowments in the early church) and use some of the same phraseology. What Paul calls “that which is perfect” in Corinthians, he calls “the unity of the faith” in Ephesians. Both terms refer to the entire, perfect, and complete revelation of God, the Bible.

Think of the miracles in general like the scaffolding of a building under construction. The scaffolding is needed to erect the building, but once the structure is completed, the scaffolding is no longer needed and is taken down.

One more specific example under this heading is the apostolic office. The apostles were men chosen directly by Christ to be His ambassadors, official

representatives with authority to reveal the gospel and bring the church into existence. They accomplished both those things in the first century; therefore, their office was no longer needed. Furthermore, the primary qualification of an apostle was that he be an eyewitness of Christ's glory. There were 12 original apostles. Judas committed suicide and Matthias was selected to take his place (Acts 1:26). Then Christ appeared to Paul, who became the last apostle.<sup>1</sup>

Because of this requirement, and the miraculous nature of the office of apostle, there can be no apostles today. The church is still being guided by the first-century apostles through their writings in the New Testament.

### THIRD: A THING IS TEMPORARY WHEN IT DEALT WITH OR WAS BASED ON A PURELY LOCAL SITUATION, CUSTOM, OR EXPEDIENCY

In the New Testament we read of several unique situations which prevailed in the first century but were temporary. One example is recorded in 1 Corinthians 7:1 and 7:27, where Paul counseled Christians not to marry. Obviously, if this were to prevail universally, the church would have disappeared long ago. Besides, God created both men and women for the express purpose of marrying and having children. But verse 26 explains: "This [counsel not to marry] is good *because of the present distress*" (a reference to some kind of intense local persecution or danger at the time). We can be sure that Paul was not establishing universal church policy for all time, because Hebrews 13:3 proclaims that marriage is an honorable state, and 1 Timothy 4:3 calls "forbidding to marry" a demonic doctrine (see verse 1).

The requirement for women to wear veils in church was a matter of controversy in Corinth in the first century. That might have been the custom at the time in Corinth, but Paul made it plain that such was not to be considered universal church law. He said in 1 Corinthians 11:16, "...we [the apostles] have no such custom, nor do the churches of God."<sup>2</sup>

Another unique situation occurred in the early life of the Jerusalem church. Acts 2:44-45 states that immediately following the establishment of the church, "...all

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<sup>1</sup> Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:8-9, "Then *last of all* He appeared to me also, as to one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

<sup>2</sup> There is an extensive discussion of the veil issue in Biblical Insights #17.

who believed were together and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all as anyone had need.” Acts 4:34 says, “Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things which were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.” Some have drawn the conclusion that this socialistic or communistic approach is incumbent upon all Christians. However, this situation was obviously a voluntary<sup>3</sup> expedient to meet a temporary need. It was not communism. Brother Burton Coffman gives a dramatic contrast between communism and the Christian practice in Jerusalem in his comments on Acts 2:44: “Christians, through love, parted their goods unto all men. Communists part all men from their goods.”

Further proof that this was a temporary, localized situation is seen in the fact that no other congregation we read of in the New Testament repeated it.

Similarly, Jesus’s command to the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and give everything to the poor (Luke 18:22) was applicable only to his situation. Owning a house is certainly not a sin; Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:22 acknowledged that the church members had houses, and many early congregations met in houses.

Other matters that were issues of local or cultural customs were a “holy kiss” (Romans 16:16, 2 Corinthians 13:12) and foot washing (John 13:5, 14).

#### FOURTH: A THING IS TEMPORARY IF WE HAVE NO BIBLICAL AUTHORITY OR INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO CONTINUE IT

Back to the apostles: who appointed them? Christ did. The church never selected apostles.<sup>4</sup> No Christian ever “ran for the office” of apostle. The church does appoint elders and deacons and preachers, and there are instructions and qualifications given in Scripture for making those appointments. But how do you select and appoint a prophet? I don’t know--the New Testament doesn’t tell me. There are no guidelines, qualifications, or procedures given in Scripture for making

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 5:4 makes it clear that selling one’s property and giving the proceeds to the church was completely voluntary, and the lands and homes of Christians remained under their own control.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 1 records the selection of an apostle to replace Judas, but Acts 1:24-26 makes it clear that the Lord chose the man, not the disciples.

someone a prophet. That lets me know that the appointment of a prophet was God's doing, and the office of prophet was not intended to continue beyond the age of miracles and inspiration.

So to review, a thing or a practice is temporary when:

- It is said or implied to be temporary (speaking in tongues, for example).
- Its need or purpose was temporary. Apostles and prophets were needed to get started and to complete the Bible. Those things having been accomplished, there is no longer a need for those miraculous offices.
- It was related to a temporary or local custom or need (for example, wearing of veils by women).
- There are no Biblical instructions or authority to continue it. There is an ongoing need in the church for elders, deacons, teachers, and preachers, and there are written instructions on how to select such individuals.

So God has given us adequate information in Scripture to enable us to discern between things related to the church that were temporary and things that are timeless. He has anticipated every need for the establishment and ongoing life of a congregation of the church of Christ. Thanks be to God! --John Temples