

The “Foundational Gifts” of Ephesians 2:20

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Abstract

Cessationists support their view that the gift of prophecy is presently inoperative by their increasing appeal to an argument-by-analogy from Eph 2:20, namely, that since apostles and prophets appear as the “foundation” of the temple/Church, and since the “foundation” can only represent one generation of time, then these “foundation” gifts necessarily passed away before the second generation of Christianity. Non-cessationist Evangelicals so far have either failed to address this argument or have assumed the main premise of the cessationists.

This cessationist argument-by-analogy fails because: 1) “foundation” indicates a “pattern” to be replicated, not a “generation” frozen in time; 2) the “foundation” of Eph 2:20 represents both Christ himself and the recurring apostolic and prophetically-inspired “foundational *confession*,” as Peter’s “great confession” (Mt 16:16-18), revealed to all Christians in every era; 3) traditional Protestantism sees a NT apostle as a 16th century pope rather than as an ongoing ministry function within the Church; 4) the cessationist metaphor, in an illogical, question-begging move, confuses the death of early apostles and prophets with the death of their gifts; 5) the metaphor is destroyed if Christ the *akrōgonē* (“cornerstone”) is, as is likely, also the “capstone” or “long-high cornerstone” holding the walls together like interlacing fingers (2:21), who is also in contact with *each stone*; 6) this cessationist metaphor violates the clear teaching of Eph 4:11, and, 7) substitutes the “letter” of the New Testament for the Spirit-revealed experience of Christ himself as the ultimate foundation.

I. Status of the Problem

One of the few remaining NT texts to which cessationists¹ appeal for support of their position is Eph 2:20.² The cessationist argument-by-analogy is that since apostles

¹For the purposes of this paper, the term, “cessationist” designates one who asserts the demise of the so-called “sign-” or “miraculous” gifts of the Holy Spirit, usually connected with the death of the apostles or completion of the NT writings. For the various descriptions and times of this termination by cessationist writers see R. W. Graves, “Tongues Shall Cease: A Critical Study of the Supposed Cessation of the Charismata,” *Paraclete* 17/4 (Fall 1983), 20-28. By contrast, Pentecostal or charismatic Christians believe that all the so-called “miraculous” gifts of the Spirit have continued in the Church. Many in this latter group, however, deny the continuing gift of apostleship.

and prophets appear as the foundation of the temple/Church, and since each course of stones in this temple metaphorically represent successive generations of believers throughout Church history, then these “foundation” gifts necessarily passed away before the second generation of Christianity.³

From the frequency and extent this argument is made in cessationist circles,⁴ one would assume that there would be a serious reply from their theological dialogue partners, the Pentecostals and charismatics. However, Pentecostal or charismatic scholars have generally failed either to treat this cessationist argument to any significant degree,⁵ or if so, adequately.

²E.g., by R. B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 1979), 93-116; R. L. Thomas, “Prophecy Rediscovered? A Review of *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*,” *BibSac* 149/593 (Jan-Mar 1992), 83-96; K. L. Gentry, *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem* (Memphis: Footstool, 1989); R. F. White, “Gaffin and Grudem on Eph 2:20: In Defense of Gaffin’s Cessationist Exegesis,” *WJT* 54 (1992), 303-20; and F.D. Farnell, “Is the Gift of Prophecy for Today?” *BibSac* 149/595 (July-September 1992), 277-303; 149/596 (October-December 1992), 387-410; 150/597 (January-March 1993), 62-88; 150/598, (April-June 1993), 171-202. This latter series derives from the author’s doctoral work, “The New Testament Prophetic Gift: Its Nature and Duration,” (ThD dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990). Richard D. Kelso, “An Evaluation of the Biblical Support Presented by Wayne Grudem regarding the Nature, Role and Exercise of Non-Apostolic Prophecy in the New Testament and Today” (M. A. Thesis, Columbia Biblical Seminary and Graduate School of Missions, 1999). R. Fowler White, “Reflections on Wayne Grudem’s ETS 1992 Presentation, The New Testament Gift of Prophecy: A Response to My Friends.” *TREN*, 1993.

³This historicist interpretation of the Eph 2:20 “cornerstone” (*akrōgonē*) metaphor has only the most tenuous support in Church history. For example, of about 101 references discovered by the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae CD-ROM, version D, virtually all of the references to the “cornerstone” of Ephesians 2:20, which offer sufficient context to discern its location, show that the “cornerstone” appears as the “capstone,” “keystone,” or the most prominent and highest stone in the building—usually the “final” stone to be placed, completing the structure. One may find a possible exception in the *Shepherd of Hermas* ANF, II: 49 “‘And the stones, sir,’ I said, ‘which were taken out of the pit and fitted into the building: what are they?’ ‘The first,’ he said, ‘the ten, viz., that were placed as a foundation, are the first generation, and the twenty-five the second generation, of righteous men; and the thirty-five are the prophets of God and His ministers; and the forty are the apostles and teachers of the preaching of the Son of God.’” This hardly offers a coherent basis for the cessationist metaphor from Eph 2:20, since the last stones mentioned, apparently the *fourth* (!) generation represent apostles!

⁴ Gaffin appeals to a “canon-within-a-canon” argument. “The decisive, controlling significance of Ephesians 2:20 (in its context) needs to be appreciated.... I Corinthians 14 ... has a relatively narrow focus and is confined to the particular situation at Corinth. Ephesians, on the other hand, may well be a circular letter, originally intended by Paul for a wider audience than the congregation at Ephesus. More importantly, 2:20 is part of a section that surveys the Church as a whole in a most sweeping and comprehensive fashion. Ephesians 2:20 stands back, views the whole building, and notes the place of prophecy in it (as part of the foundation); I Corinthians and the other passages on prophecy examine one of the parts from within. Ephesians 2:20, then, with its broad scope ought to have a pivotal and governing role in seeking to understand other NT statements on prophecy with a narrower, more particular and detailed focus...” *Perspectives on Pentecost*. p. 96. “Ephesians 2:20 figures prominently in this debate.” Charles E. Powell, Dallas Theological Seminary, at the 48th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Jackson, MS, November 1996. <http://www.bible.org/docs/theology/pneuma/giftques.htm>

⁵ For example, in Jack Deere’s influential work, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) there is a brief treatment (p. 248) with the promise of a plan to discuss Eph 2:20 in detail

This paper offers a biblical rebuttal to the cessationist use of Ephesians 2:20 as an argument for the cessation of prophecy, and, by extension, the other so-called “miraculous” gifts of the Holy Spirit. After a statement of the issue itself, this paper examines the only significant “anti-cessationist” response offered so far, that of Wayne Grudem, and then goes on to offer some alternative responses of its own.

Wayne Grudem’s Rebuttal to the Cessationist Use of Ephesians 2:20

Wayne Grudem is the only scholar I can discover who attacks the cessationist argument from Eph 2:20 in any detail,⁶ so quite reasonably, Grudem’s response stands as the default Pentecostal/charismatic position among cessationists,⁷ along with their perceptions about its strengths and weaknesses.

Though he presents his position as an attempt to mediate between charismatics and cessationists, it appears that Grudem’s defense on this point shares traditional cessationist presuppositions about the nature of apostles and of the “foundation” in Ephesians 2:20. Grudem seems to agree with cessationists who argue against the continuation of the gift of prophecy in that the gift is somehow identical with the first generation (“foundation level”) of Christian prophets: that, necessarily, when these particular prophets died, the gift of prophecy died with them. The same, he would also agree, would be true of apostles.

Grudem, however, ingeniously denies the death of prophecy by claiming that only a *special category* of prophets is described in Eph. 2:20, namely, that they are “foundational,” and hence, *cease* because these particular prophets are in fact, *apostles!* He also offers an alternate possibility that perhaps these “foundational” prophets were an elite group that received and uttered apostolic-level revelation. He agrees, then, with cessationists that apostles, at least the original twelve (or thirteen, if we include Paul) stood to be unique in that they are seen as the authoritative bearers of foundational Christian doctrine, which they wrote into Scripture. Accordingly, Grudem sees the apostle/prophets of Eph 2:20 as the equivalent of the canonical prophets of the Old Testament,

“in my next book.” If *Surprised by the Voice of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) is that next book, the passage does not appear in the Scripture index, nor am I able to discover any discussion of it. Similarly, in another major work Gary S. Greig and Kevin N. Springer (eds.), *The Kingdom and the Power: Are Healing and the Spiritual Gifts Used by Jesus and the Early Church Meant for the Church Today?* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1993), one page is devoted to Eph 2:20 in a chapter by Wayne Grudem (see below). J. Rodman Williams does not treat the cessationist view of Eph 2:20, but rather seems to affirm it, at least with respect to the “original” 13, apostles, including Paul--as opposed to “continuing” apostles. *Renewal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 173. No real critique of the “foundational” argument appears in the extended discussion in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* Ed., Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

⁶ E.g., in the adaptation of his Cambridge Ph.D. dissertation, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), 82-105.

⁷ Note 2, above.

whose pronouncements and writings also held ultimate religious authority in that they later became Scripture.⁸

On this view, and to preserve the continuation of Christian prophecy, Grudem must then define NT prophecy in two categories. 1) Agreeing with traditional cessationists, the first class of prophecy, which was to cease within the first generation, was a kind of interim canon awaiting its written form, while, 2) the second class of prophecy was represented by the “less authoritative type of prophecy indicated in 1 Corinthians.”⁹

Grudem’s novel defense precipitated a detailed response from cessationists, who wish to deny any “two-level” gift of prophecy that Grudem describes.¹⁰ Without going into their argument in detail, these respondents seek to prove that *all* manifestations of the gift of prophecy in the first generation will cease together, since prophecy is divine revelation, and such revelation must necessarily be enscriptured.¹¹

⁸ “We all (some of Grudem’s cessationist critics and himself) agree that *these* [italics his] prophets are ones who provided the foundation of the Church, and therefore these are prophets who spoke infallible words of God. . . . Whether we say this group was only the apostles, or was a small group of prophets closely associated with the apostles who spoke Scripture-quality words, we are still left with a picture of a very small and unique group of people who provide this foundation for the Church universal.” *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1051, n. 4.

⁹ *Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*, 105. Also, his *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester, Ill.: 1989), 45-63 and his *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1051.

¹⁰ E.g., by F. David Farnell, “Fallible New Testament Prophecy/Prophets? A Critique of Wayne Grudem’s Hypothesis,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 2:2 (Fall 1991), 165-77. Even a significant charismatic writer resists this distinction. Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts in the New Testament Church and Today*, rev. ed (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 215.

¹¹ Michael Moriarty states this position clearly. God placed prophets in the apostolic Churches to “provide doctrinal insights” only during an “interim period” in which Churches “had only portions of the Bible.” *The New Charismatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 231. So also, Farnell, *ibid.* Gaffin appears to hold this view. He writes:

I should emphasize that, during the foundational, apostolic period of the Church, its “canon” (i.e., where I find God’s word and revealed will for my life) was a fluid, evolving entity, made up of three factors: (1) a completed Old Testament; (2) an eventual New Testament and other inspired documents no longer extant (e.g., the letter mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9), as each was written and then circulated (cf. Col 4:16); and (3) an oral apostolic and prophetic voice (“whether by word of mouth or by letter” [2 Thess 2:15] points to this authoritative mix of oral and written). The Church at that time lived by a “Scripture plus” principle of authority and guidance; by the nature of the case, it could not yet be committed, as a formal principle, to *sola Scriptura*.

“A Cessationist View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* ed. Wayne A. Grudem, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 45-46 fn. 50.

What Gaffin has essentially done is redefine the canon for the NT Church. For them it contains revelation not included in the Scriptures. But now, after the completion of the NT, the canon is simply the Bible. This simply will not do. The canon is either Scripture only or all revelation. It cannot be both; one for the apostolic Church and the other for the post-apostolic Church. Gaffin’s argument seems to be a desperate expedient to preserve both the completion of the canon and cessationism.

Grudem therefore finds himself in an interesting dilemma: on the one hand, since he sees apostles (and this first class of NT prophets) as the New Testament counterparts of Old Testament prophets and therefore “were able to speak and write words that had absolute divine authority,”¹² that is, in the canon of Scripture, it is crucial to restrict this class of men to the “foundational” and unrepeatably. Because of the central apostolic role as Scripture writers, and because the canon of the NT is closed, the gift or “office” of apostleship must necessarily cease.¹³ On the other hand, “apostleship” is seamlessly listed along with the other “miraculous” spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12:28 and Eph 4:11, gifts which Grudem insists must continue in the Church! In short, Grudem’s views of apostleship, prophecy, revelation and Scripture leave him vulnerable to the charge that he is fatally inconsistent in his defense of continuing spiritual gifts.

But does Scripture itself view the NT apostles and prophets as conscious repositories of unwritten or uncanonized Scripture, or is this notion of these biblical figures held by Grudem and his cessationist counterparts anachronistic and too narrow?

The Protestant Tradition and Its Bearing on

the “Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets” in Evangelical Interpretation

How has the doctrine of apostles and prophets as unrepeatably offices come about? Perhaps a brief review of the historically conditioned origin of “foundational” cessationist doctrine may be illuminating. It appears that this Evangelical cessationist tradition underlying this view of Eph 2:20 has been uncritically passed down from the polemics of the Reformers against the Papacy.

To undercut Papal claims to ultimate religious authority via apostolic succession,¹⁴ the Reformers failed to examine adequately the NT roles of apostle and prophet. Rather they assumed the premises of Rome and simply transferred the crown and the authority of the 16th century Pope to the first century apostles! The apostles, then on this view, the receivers of unique divine revelation, canonized their ultimate ecclesiastical and doctrinal authority, not in papal encyclicals, but in the New Testament. The Reformers, and particularly the scholastic theologians who followed them, further protected the “Papal” authority of the New Testament by denying any *additional divine revelation* based implicitly on the “foundational” role of prophets in Eph 2:20.¹⁵

¹² *Systematic Theology*, 1050.

¹³ It is interesting that when choosing the four dialogue partners for the book Grudem edited, *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), neither of the charismatic or Pentecostal participants affirmed the continuation of one of the spiritual gifts: apostleship! See my review in *Pneuma* Review of Wayne Grudem (ed.), *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*. Zondervan, 1996 in *Pneuma* 21:1 (Spring 1999), 155-58. Also in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42:3 (September 1999), 531-32.

¹⁴ Even today, Roman Catholic apologists appeal to Eph 2:20 as a proof text for Papal authority. Anthony Saldarini, “Chapter 2, Interpretation: Part One: The Biblical Period,” in *Papal Infallibility: An Application of Lonergan’s Theological Method*, ed. T. J. Teikppe (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1983), 18.

¹⁵ See the historical developments during the Reformation on this passage in R. Schnackenberg, *Ephesians A Commentary*, E.t., Helen Heron (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 326-28.

In this historical context, then, to Protestants, the notion of a continuing gift of apostleship, or a gift of divine prophetic revelation, is anathema. “Apostles today” represents the specter of apostolic succession and the Papacy, while the contemporary prophecy implies the claim to ultimate, but constantly evolving and increasingly contaminated, *ex cathedra* doctrinal authority over the Church. For this reason, and not for biblical reasons, have the cessation of apostles and prophets become a “foundational” doctrine for traditional Protestant theology. The application of this polemic, then, could be easily and uncritically transferred to anyone advocating the continuation of spiritual gifts, particularly explosive being those of apostles and prophets.

An Alternative View of the “Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets”

If this Evangelical tradition leading to the cessationist position fails to reflect an adequate interpretation of Ephesians 2:20, then what alternative can be offered? This paper would suggest that “the foundation” of Eph 2:20 represents the recurring apostolic and prophetically-inspired “foundational *confession*,” as Peter’s “great confession” (Mt 16:16-19), which is *revealed* to and *confessed* by all Christians at all times.¹⁶ Peter’s confession is universally considered to be both paradigmatic and parenetic. This position, of course, is merely a specifying of the standard identification of the “foundation” derived from Calvin, *i.e.*, foundational doctrine.¹⁷

I would suggest that the earlier Christian tradition of Peter’s confession shaped the Eph 2:20 metaphor in that both share at least four key elements: 1) the *prophetic revelation* from the Father was stressed as the means by which Peter knew that, 2) Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (the central point of the discussion); 3) the “*foundation*” language of building Christ’s Church “on this rock”; 4) the *archetypal role of Peter results from his prophetic confession*: a) the play on words for “rock,” connecting his prophetic confession to the “foundation” and building of the Church; b) the fact that he was given the keys to the kingdom: not only that he had access himself at that point, but also the role he had in unlocking the kingdom to the Christo-centric prophetic experiences of the Samaritans in Acts 8 and Gentiles in Acts 10.

The debate on the precise meaning of this last phrase is historic: how does “rock” mean: Peter’s leadership? Peter’s confession, which somehow “unlocked” the kingdom to all, and could “bind” and “loose” sins? That Peter’s confession was a paradigm for *all* to confess, thereby unlocking the kingdom and being built into the Church? Was the rock

¹⁶ New Testament scholars may cringe at this easy leap between the Ephesian and Matthean traditions. This elicits two responses: 1) Rabbinic exegesis, which seems to have shaped NT writers’ use of scripture and traditions, identifies large scriptural passages by odd words, phrases, or allusions (in this case, the concepts of foundation, building the church, apostle, revelation and Christ-as-foundation). This cluster of notions could easily have evoked the “Great Confession” pericope from the oral tradition with which Paul was likely familiar. 2) The early Christian communities may not have been nearly as isolated from one another as so much NT scholarship these days seems to assume. So, the thesis of Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹⁷ “Built on the foundation, — they are founded on the doctrine, of the apostles and prophets.” Calvin, *Ephesians*, *ad loc* [2:20]. It is “normative teaching.” A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 154. Schnackenberg, *Ephesians*, 326-28.

Christ himself (“this *petra*,” distinguished from *Petros*)? If the latter, then how are the revelation, the confession and the keys related to the rock/foundation and the building?

What seems clear from all of this, however, is that since this story is written in canonical Scripture, it has some claim upon the reader other than to relay historical information. It would seem that Peter’s prophetic confession is in some sense *paradigmatic and archetypal* for all who would be believers in Christ. The pericope would also seem to suggest that this revealed confession unlocks the kingdom to the confessor, and that the whole assembly of confessors, the Church, would rest and be built up on the rock—either this confession about Christ, or Christ himself (Rom 15:20; 1 Cor 3:11), or both.

Ephesians 2:20 relates to Peter’s confession along the four points above. 1) The “apostles and prophets” (those who receive and confess *revelation*) parallel “Peter” and the importance of his “revelation” about 2) Christ, the “cornerstone” (chief of the “foundation”). 3) The temple is then “built” upon this foundation “in him” // “I [Christ] will build my Church.” 4) The *archetypal* (“*foundational*”) *roles* of the apostles and prophets *result from their prophetic confession*: a) the play on words for “rock” (“cornerstone”), connecting their prophetic confession to the “foundation,” b) just as Peter now may unlock the kingdom because of his revelation, so now, also both Jew and Gentile have access “*by one Spirit*” (Eph 2:18). Note that the Gentiles once were “excluded from *citizenship in Israel*” (2:12) but now are “no longer foreigners and aliens, but *fellow citizens with God’s people*” (2:19).

But *how* are both Jews and Gentiles brought into this citizenship/kingdom, or what *activity* is involved to enter? Through the work of Christ *all* have “access to the Father *by one Spirit*” (2:18. In the NT era “Spirit” was virtually synonymous with “prophecy”). The next verse continues on about inclusion into God’s household, which is “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets* (personifications of revelation, as Peter’s “*foundational*” confession), with Christ as the *chief* cornerstone” (also implied in the Peter’s confession pericope). Here the metaphor changes slightly where all are being built “*in him*,” “*in the Lord*,” “*in him*,” (thrice: vs. 21 and 22, clearly a “*revelatory*” state as we know him “*according to the Spirit*”) and finally, “*being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit*” (another revelatory reference).

On this suggestion, then, that the “*foundation*” of apostles and prophets represents a parallel expression of Peter’s confession with the subsequent inclusion of the Gentiles, we offer an interpretation of Eph 2:20. Contrary to the cessationist or exclusivist notion that a certain type of revelation accredited the status of apostles and prophets, a much deeper dynamic is portrayed in this passage: that the “*foundation of the apostles and prophets*” symbolizes a way by which *everyone on earth* may enter into God’s temple/kingdom/covenant/citizenship/household, that is, by the *Spirit-revealed* confession of Christ Jesus.

The passage exists not to prove the Papal authority or the uniqueness of the apostles and prophets, but rather to express the “*foundational*” means of entering divine fellowship: “No one can confess ‘Jesus is Lord!’ except by the Spirit.” *This confession*, then, is the “*foundation of the apostles and prophets!*”¹⁸

¹⁸ Marcus Barth takes a related view of this “*confession-as-foundation*.” “Most likely the term ‘*foundation*’ in 2:20 is more fully explicated by 4:7, 11; 6:19-20, *i.e.*, by those verses in Ephesians that speak of the preaching, exhorting and warning activity of the spokesmen of God assigned to the Church by Christ.” *Ephesians*, ABC (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 315-16.

Certainly this apostolic and prophetic revelation is not limited to this group in Eph 2:20, unless of course, Paul is speaking of *all believers* as being “foundational!” In 1:15-23 Paul’s goal for the reader (and not merely for first-century Ephesians if this book is to be regarded as canonical for the Church), via his prayer, is that “the Father may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know [“experience first hand”] him better.” Paul continues by further describing “wisdom and revelation”: “that the eyes of your *heart* may be enlightened in order that you may know [“experience first hand”] the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power [*dunamis*—most often in the NT, “miracle working power”],” which is *like* God’s resurrection power. Paul wishes the revelation to the reader to move to the extent that they know that Christ is exalted above *all* powers and nations using the language of Psalm 2. Paul then, seems to be setting the goal for *revelation of the inclusion of all nations* under Christ, who in the Church “fills everything in every way.” In other words, it is clear that both canonically and therefore normatively, *all believers* are to share in the “revelation” of the Gentile inclusion in the Church. Paul does not pray that the reader be given the “New Testament” of “wisdom and revelation,” but the “*Spirit* of wisdom and revelation,” the content of which is both clear and propositional.

Another passage, Eph 3:14-19, illustrates the normative, shared and continuing revelation expected for *all* believers. Again, Paul prays, indicating the ideal for the readers, that the Father “may strengthen you with power [*dunamis*, again] through His Spirit [of revelation and wisdom] in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your *hearts* [center of spiritual perception] through *faith* [not in this passage through the NT, but via a subjective awareness/assurance] . . . that being rooted and established in love [for the Jews or Gentiles?] you may have power together with *all the saints* to grasp [the extent] of the love of Christ [again, the unity of Jew and Gentile?] . . . that you may be filled to the measure of *all* the fullness of God.” Cessationists restrict this kind of outpouring only for the “foundation gifts” of apostles and prophets. But in what sense should we understand the “foundation gifts/offices” of the Church? Let us now examine the cessationist argument from Eph 2:20.

Unpacking the Metaphor, “The Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets”

In what sense is the “foundation” comprised of apostles and prophets? For the cessationist argument to work it must prove that when this “foundation” group died, their Scripture-creating authority and gifts necessarily died with them. Several responses are in order.

First, a general observation. Even if the parallel between the archetypal and paradigmatic Petrine confession to the Eph 2:20 passage is denied, and the apostles and prophets are seen as human deposits of Scripture, it remains to be proven that no one could replace them or that their revelatory gifts belong exclusively to them and not to the Holy Spirit. However, the fatal exception to the cessationist argument-by-analogy is the presence of Christ Jesus as the main element in the “foundation.”

Let us lay out the premises of this cessationist argument-by-analogy.

Premise #1: The term, “foundation” is necessarily a descriptor of *a limited period of time, i.e., a “generation.”* Necessarily, then, this “foundation” *cannot* indicate an

“archetypal event” shared by all believers, like a confession, nor can it refer to a normative, replicatable “pattern,” say, of ministry. Moreover, “foundation” cannot be a metonymy for the building as a whole.¹⁹

Premise #2: Anyone constituting this “foundation” necessarily cannot function past this “foundational” time-frame, either as a person, or as a class of activity that is essentially and characteristically associated with that person, *e.g.*, apostleship or prophecy. The death of those constituting the “foundation” necessarily demands the death of their characteristic gifts, which then, in some sense, are transmuted into a body of enscripturated doctrine.²⁰

Premise #3: Jesus Christ is a constituent part, as the “chief cornerstone,” indeed the very essence, of this “foundation (1 Cor 3:11).”²¹

These premises lead us to a fatal dilemma. If the “foundation” is necessarily limited to the first century, then the life and the essential characteristic “Jesus-class” activities, such as regeneration, justification and sanctification, perforce have ceased and have been reduced to a body of enscripturated doctrine. On the other hand, if Christ is alive and active in His ministry in the Holy Spirit, then the “foundation” must be stretched to include the present time.²² If either is the case, the cessationist interpretation of Eph 2:20 fails.

¹⁹ A premise contradicted by K. L. Schmidt, “*themelios*,” *TDNT*, III:63.

²⁰ On “foundation” as a deposit of doctrine, see W. Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969), 43, esp. n. 91.

²¹ E. Fowler White, “Gaffin and Grudem on Ephesians 2:20,” 304 n.6. “Strictly speaking, for Gaffin the foundation of the Church consists of Christ (Eph 2:20b; 1 Cor 3:11) and the apostles and prophets. The laying of the foundation (Isa 28:16) began with Christ (*e.g.*, Matt 21:42-44) [*sic!*] and concluded with the apostles and prophets as witnesses to Christ (*e.g.*, Luke 24:44-48).” So Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost*, 91-93, 107-08.

²² A cessationist response to this syllogism might be that there is a sense in which “Jesus-class” activities might well have “ceased” in one of two ways. *First*, Jesus’ earthly ministry was “foundational,” since at his ascension and reign, His ministry changed in fundamental ways. So, the analogy would run, apostles and prophets would have an earthly ministry, receiving and issuing “Scripture-quality” revelation during the “foundational” period, but after their death, their ministry would continue in their Scriptures.

At this point, however, the analogy would be quite shaky. The ascension of Jesus—the end of his “foundational” period—precipitated a profusion of miraculous, revelatory Spiritual gifts, which then encountered *another* terminating “foundational” period: that of the apostles and prophets. The “foundations” are neither congruent temporally, nor conceptually. Moreover, the point of the cessationist analogy is that the apostles and prophets were, in and of themselves, the *gifts* of apostleship and prophecy. On this reasoning, Jesus Christ is, in and of himself, a *gift* of salvation, which would die when He physically died.

But these apostles and prophets in no sense continue *personally* to participate in the lives of believers today via the Spirit *as Christ does*. Moreover, Christ’s gift does not die with him, but rather is *made viable only in His death*. These points open up such a serious disjunction between the foundational members that one must seek another interpretation of the metaphor.

A better analogy would be: the Church is founded on a blended metaphor of Christ himself and the Spirit-revealed confession of Christ, the Son of the Living God, a confession like that of the apostles and prophets, *i.e.*, a revelatory experience, which, *like the present ministry of Christ, continues through the Holy Spirit*. This calls to mind the maxim from the Book of Revelation: “The Spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus.” The Spirit of prophecy cannot be simply equated with the unfinished canon of the New Testament!

Two further difficulties derive from the cessationist argument-by-analogy. 1) The “joining” of *all* elements of the building/temple *in Christ who is the foundation*. 2) The clear references to Christ as being the *last* or *final* stone in the building/temple.

1) If verses 21 and 22 are normative and canonical for all the Church, then the cessationist argument becomes untenable, in that the argument demands that *whole Church* is necessarily limited to the generation of the apostles and prophets. As the text states: “*in whom* [Christ the cornerstone] *all the building is being fitted together* (*sunarmologoumene*) and “*in whom* [Christ the cornerstone] *you also are being built together* (*sunoikodomeisthe*). The metaphor is about the connection of the building growing into a holy temple “*in the Lord*.” The “foundation,” then, cannot represent a limited time or a generation if “the *whole building*” is so categorically and individually “in Christ,” “in the Spirit.” If Christ is limited to the first-century “foundation,” then how can subsequent generations of Christians, indeed the whole Church, be so emphatically “in Christ”—a typical Pauline expression, which is a characteristic of each and every believer?

2) This insight is further supported by the use of the term, “cornerstone” for Christ in this and in other contexts. Considerable debate²³ continues over the placement of the cornerstone, whether as part of the foundation, as the cessationists would insist, or as the high “capstone”²⁴ or “stringer”—a long stone at the corner of a building which holds two walls together as interlacing fingers, that is, the two “walls” of Jew and Gentile.²⁵

Where the NT writers cite Ps 118:22, “The stone which the builders rejected has now become the head of the corner (*kephalē gōnias*)” (Mt 21:42//Mk 12:10//Lk 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pt 4:7), it seems abundantly clear that the position is exalted or high and not a part of the “foundation.” The contrast is drawn, on the one hand, between a rejected stone, not included in the building, but likely lying undetectable, on the ground (perhaps hidden in weeds), as a “stone of stumbling” (Isa 8:14, cited in 1 Pt. 2:8, *cf.* Mt 21:44//Lk

A *second cessationist rejoinder* might be to insist that there is an analogy between the apostles/prophets and Jesus, in that both spoke Scripture-quality words until the end of “foundational” period, when the canon was completed.

Again, for the cessationist “foundation” metaphor to hold, it must treat Christ, as part of that foundation, in identical ways as the apostles and prophets: the central and characterizing expression of Christ, certainly involving the gift of Salvation itself, would need to cease at His death—a position flatly contradicted by the very Scripture cessationism purports to defend.

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith not be based on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power (1 Cor 2:4-5).

²³ See the summary in A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary, 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 154.

²⁴ G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 66: “The top-most angle or point of a pyramid, obelisk, etc.”

²⁵ So Cyril, *Is.* 3.2 (2.397E) and John of Damascus, *Hom.* 4.30 (MPG 96.632c).

20:18), and on the other hand, as later being chosen to be exalted at the “head of the corner.”²⁶

The cessationist metaphor is hereby faced with a difficulty. Even if we concede that Christ is the “foundation” of the Church in Eph 2:20 and 1 Cor 3:11, perhaps derived from Peter’s confession, we *also* have a Christ who is clearly placed as the “capstone” or “head of the corner.” Since the cessationist argument depends wholly on its understanding of the building stones as persons whose temporally-limited, characteristic gifts and activities die with them, what are we to make of Christ’s appearance at the very “end” of the Church’s time-span? Would not the cessationist “foundational” metaphor demand that Christ’s characteristic gifts and activities continue to the end of the Church period? If this is true, and if Christ is the most essential element of the “foundation,” then what does that say about the other members of the foundation? Does not this necessarily demand that their “foundational” gifts also continue until the same time? If not, why not?

3) A final observation involves the historical point of view of the apostolic writer of this metaphor himself, St Paul, a fact which renders the cessationist interpretation of this passage impossible. In verse 20 Paul says that the Ephesian Church was built upon the apostles and prophets, past tense. That being the case, according to this cessationist view, apostleship and prophecy, gifts that cessationists rigidly tie to the canon of Scripture, could no longer be in operation at the time of Paul’s writing to the Ephesians, for Paul is clear that the incorporation of the Jews and Gentiles has already taken place. At least one level of stones had been laid on the completed “foundation.” How, then can Paul continue to receive and transmit divine revelation, or even call himself an apostle? Even if we deny the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, someone with “Scripture-level authority” wrote Ephesians *after* a generation of stones had been laid on the “foundation.” If the cessationist interpretation of Ephesians 2:20 is correct, Paul did not have the authority to say that apostleship and prophecy no longer existed, for he himself would no longer be an apostle.²⁷

Apostles, Prophets and Scripture

The cessationist model of apostles and prophets as *essentially* serving as repositories of unwritten Scripture is a caricature. The connection between these gifts and the NT canon is simply not as explicit in Scripture itself as the cessationists would have us believe. For example, when one actually adds up the number of words in the NT written by apostles, as opposed to non-apostles, the ratio is an astonishing 49%-51% respectively! Apostles, even by the most conservative Evangelical attribution of NT authorship,²⁸ have

²⁶ Elwell expresses a common misconception in that he seems to feel that it is difficult to have a “stone of stumbling” if placed in the foundation as a cornerstone, “but metaphors can be stretched.” The point of two of our passages (Mt 21 and Lk 20) is that the stone cannot be in the building at all if it is indeed, “rejected”!

²⁷ I owe this observation to Robert Graves, “That Glorious Day,” *Pneuma Review* 3:2 (Spring 2000), 45.

²⁸ Assuming here that Hebrews is not written by an apostle. Few Evangelical today believe this book to be written by Paul! For our purposes the books written by apostles are: Matthew, John, the Pauline corpus, including Ephesians and the Pastorals, 1,2 Peter, 1,2,3 John, Revelation.

written *less than one-half* of the New Testament! Moreover, if the circle of apostleship is so closely guarded, remember that Paul who was *not a member of the original twelve* wrote 43 % of the “apostolic” 49 %! The Acts account records the heavy emphasis the eleven made on the *physical* presence with Jesus.²⁹ The apostleship of Paul breaks this physical link,³⁰ which by implication, tends to universalize the exclusive apostolic contact with Jesus. He insists that “we no longer know (experience) Christ according to the flesh (via weak, human capacities)” (2 Cor 5:16), but now according to the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17). The central point, here, however, is that NT Scripture itself is unaware that a new “canon” is being produced by the apostles, and in no case is it stated that even *one* task of an apostle was to write Scripture!

Moreover, the apostolic “authority” is far from clear. Most of Paul’s references to apostles are negative and critical (*e.g.*, 2 Cor 10-12; Gal 1-2); he finds he must spend strenuous effort even to defend his own apostleship, which seems generally contested, and unrecognized even by some of his own Churches! On the other hand, the “super-apostles” (2 Cor 11:5) opposed the major message of Ephesians, the reconciliation with the Gentiles by faith and not the law. Were these apostles from James in Jerusalem (Gal 2:12), who intimidated even Peter, the first Pope, to withdraw from his mission to the Gentiles! At least two of the three “pillars” of the Jerusalem Church seem to have also turned against this mission! The pattern of apostolic commitment to sound doctrine, then, seems scattered at best. Certainly *four* apostles had a hand in writing the NT, but many more did not.

The relationship between NT prophets to the NT canon is even more obscure. It is true that the Spirit is seen to inspire prophetically the Scriptures some ten times,³¹ the same Spirit reveals and causes prophetic utterances of other kinds 153 times! While one can show that the Revelator regarded his book as “prophecy” (Rev 22:18-19), it is a great leap to assume, therefore, that all NT prophecy must be oral Scripture!³² Indeed, the *specific functions* of NT prophecy are explicitly written: to praise and glorify God (Acts 2:14), for edification, exhortation and consolation (1 Cor 14:3, *cf.* Acts 15:32) and the equipping of believers toward ultimate spiritual goals (Eph 4:12-13). One hypothetical case of prophecy offered by Paul (1 Cor 14:24-25) shows prophecy revealing the secrets of the heart to lead toward repentance. Certainly none of these explicit purposes that the *New Testament itself describes* of prophecy hints at the writing of a NT document!

Moreover, the examples of prophecy in Acts show utterly different purposes for their expression than that of accumulating an oral reservoir of Scripture! Agabus informs

²⁹ “Therefore it is *necessary* to choose on of the men who have been with us the *whole time* the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, *beginning from John’s baptism* to the time when Jesus was taken up from us” [*NIV*, italics mine].

³⁰ As the events of Pentecost appear to do also, since the filling up of the “12” seems to have been actualized, not with the election of Matthias, who is never heard from again, but rather in the 120 as the symbolic community of the New Israel comprised of prophets.

³¹ Mt 22:43; Mk.12:36; Acts 1:16; 28:25; Heb 3:7; 9:8; 10:15; 1 Pt 1:11,12; 2 Pt 1:21.

³² Robert L. Thomas, “The Correlation of Revelatory Spiritual Gifts and NT Canonicity,” *Master’s Seminary Journal*, 8 (Spr 1997), 5-28.

the Antioch Church of an impending famine, motivating a charitable contribution for needy believers in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). Antioch prophets commission Paul and Barnabas for a mission outreach (Acts 11:1-3). Judas and Silas “encouraged and strengthened” the Gentile Churches with an unrecorded prophetic message after the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15:32-33). Ephesian converts prophesied, but nothing is recorded of the content (Acts 19:6). The Tyrean disciples “through the Spirit” urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:3-4). Philip had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21:9). Agabus prophetically warns Paul that he would be arrested and bound if he went to Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-11). In no case do any of these prophets or the narrator of these texts indicate that any prophetic utterance was intended as a “foundational doctrine” on which the Church would be built! Certainly and obviously these cases of prophecy were *recorded* in Scripture, but there is no indication from these texts whatsoever that the *essential function* of prophecy was to serve as oral Scripture until it could be reduced to writing. If, indeed, the function of the gifts determine their duration, then it is clear that demanding the cessation of apostles and prophets because of their input into the process of writing Scripture is based on the most tenuous NT indications. The strong and explicit functions of these gifts seem to evidence, rather, their continuation until their tasks are complete at the parousia. Ephesians continues its description of apostles and prophets in 4:11-13 where it describes the gifts being given to the Church *until (mechri) we all* enter the eschatological state of “attaining to the *whole measure* of the *fullness* of Christ.”

Concluding Statement

The most unsettling premise of the ‘foundational’ argument is the notion employed of what ultimately is the ‘foundation’—the most important element or core value—of the Church. Some cessationists appear to be insisting that the ‘foundation’ is the established doctrine of the NT documents. As one committed to the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, I would never seek to minimize the central significance of the Bible for faith. Nevertheless, the Bible in general, and Ephesians in particular, does not identify *itself* as the foundational core of the Church. Rather, the *disclosure experience of Christ*, although within its biblical framework, is truly the foundation of the Church. St Paul was concerned that Christians’ faith rested *not* on *words*, but on ‘a demonstration of the Spirit’s power’ (I Cor. 2.14). This strongly suggests that normatively, a system of propositions, however true they may be, is not the basis for faith; rather it is *Christ himself*, through the *activity* of the *Spirit* of Christ, with a strong overtone of revelation, that characterizes this foundation.