

CESSATIONISM AND NON-CESSATIONISM

Are all of the gifts mentioned in the New Testament valid for use in the church today?
An Elder Council Position Paper

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, evangelical church experience and the study of Scripture have resulted in increased interest and differing positions over the question, “Are all of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament valid for use in the church today?” Responses to this question have resulted in several diverse statements of position and belief. Each statement of belief is unique and some can be identified by name. However, rather than present a detailed discussion of each position, we believe that a more constructive approach to discussion centers around the primary question, “Have some of the gifts ceased?” In response to this question, two basic positions emerge, that of the cessationist and that of the non-cessationist.

When considering the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the cessationist believes that certain gifts (typically those specifically mentioned in 1st Corinthians 12:7-11, generally identified as the miraculous gifts), ceased long ago, when the apostles died and Scripture was complete. The non-cessationist does not believe Scripture supports this point of view. We hold to the non-cessationist position, believing that God continues to gift believers and perform miraculous acts as He did in the days of the Bible.

The “charismatic renewal” has brought increased attention to the miraculous gifts. To some extent, it has also resulted in a preoccupation with spiritual gifts, when our focus should be on the Giver of gifts. This preoccupation has resulted in two extremes, one that overemphasizes spiritual gifts and one that believes that certain gifts have completely ceased (cessationism).

We do not join with either of these extreme views. Holding a non-cessationist position, we declare the absolute necessity of the sovereignty and power of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s daily life, as well as in the ministry of the body of Christ, His church. We also embrace the truth that “all things have been created by Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16), and that the power of the Spirit, as manifested in the spiritual gifts, are bestowed primarily to enable the believer for ministry (to edify the body of Christ), to live a holy life and to glorify God. We recognize that a preoccupation with spiritual gifts can result in abuses, counterfeits and perversions. Yet, mistakes and abuses of a gift do not make the gift itself invalid. The *abuse* of a gift does not mean that we must prohibit the *proper use* of the gift. The manifestation of any gift must follow biblical guidelines, such as those found in 1st Corinthians 14.

PRINCIPLE QUESTIONS and RESPONSES

In reading Scripture exclusively, it is our belief that one cannot substantiate the cessationist position. One must be taught this position. For this reason, the most effective communication of the *non-cessationist* position is to address specifically the major statements or assertions of the cessationist view, providing a non-cessationist response. Several sources, each of which is noted at the end of this document, have assisted us in addressing each statement of position.

Statement 1: 1st Corinthians 13:8-13 teaches that the miraculous gifts passed away with the completion of the New Testament.

(1st Cor. 8-13 NASB) 8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known. 13 But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

This Scripture clearly indicates that certain gifts will cease. The question is when. The passage indicates that “when the perfect comes”, these imperfect gifts will pass away. The question centers on Paul’s reference to the coming “perfection”.

The cessationist believes that the “perfect” refers to the completed canon of Scripture. Because the Bible was not yet complete, the miraculous gifts provided the 1st century church with needed revelation. With the completion of the Scripture, the “perfect” had come and these gifts were no longer needed. The “partial” was done away with.

The non-cessationist believes that “perfection” refers to the second coming of Christ and that these gifts are intended for the present church age. Upon Christ’s return, these gifts will no longer be needed and will cease. The majority of biblical interpreters conclude that “perfection” refers to the second coming of Christ and not the completion of the canon of Scripture. The following is a summary of these conclusions:

- A. Paul said that when the perfect comes, we will see God “face to face”. This phrase is also used in the Old Testament and refers to seeing God personally. Revelation 22:4 says that in heaven, “They will see His face.” The canon of Scripture reveals much about God, but it does not provide a face-to-face meeting with Him. This will occur when Christ returns.
- B. Paul provides additional insight when he says, “I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” The Scripture helps us to know many things, but it cannot be said that we know God fully through them. We will know Him fully when Christ returns.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, the much acclaimed Bible teacher and pastor, makes this passionate appeal to those who view the word *perfect* as being the closing of the canon of Scripture:

[Do] you see what that involves? It means that you and I who have the Scripture open before us, know much more than the apostle Paul of God's truth . . . if that argument is correct. It means that we are altogether superior to the early church, and even to the apostles themselves, including the apostle Paul! . . . The "then" is the glory everlasting. It is only then that I shall know, even as also I am known; for then I shall see Him as He is.ⁱ

- C. Finally, in reading Paul's letter, it is doubtful that the concept of a closed canon would have occurred to the Corinthian church. Because the return of Christ is a far more common theme in Scripture, it is likely that when Paul referred to a future day when they would see Christ face-to-face, it was His return that came to mind.

In Lloyd –Jones' summary regarding the cessationist perspective, he brings powerful insight and poignant accountability regarding how we approach God's Word.

Let me begin to answer by giving you just one thought. . . The Scriptures never anywhere say that these things were only temporary – never! There is no such statement anywhere. . . . So you see the difficulties men land themselves in when they dislike something and cannot fully understand it and try to explain it away. All things must be judged in the light of the Scriptures, and we must not twist them to suit our theory or argument.ⁱⁱ

Statement 2: The miraculous gifts ceased with the last apostle.

In 1918, B.B. Warfield, a professor at Princeton Seminary, wrote a book called *Counterfeit Miracles*. Mr. Warfield's writing is recognized as the classic statement regarding the cessation of miraculous gifts with the death of the apostles, Stephen and Philip. Warfield's conclusion is based on the premise that the miraculous gifts were given to authenticate the apostles as trustworthy deliverers of doctrine. When the apostles died, this authenticating power died with them. The primary texts used by the cessationist to support this claim include:

(Acts 5:12 NASB) And at the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico.

(2 Cor. 12:12) The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.

(Hebrews 2:3-4) After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, 4 God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

Scripture certainly indicates that the apostles served a unique foundational role in redemptive history and that they were uniquely empowered for ministry. The problem with this argument, however, is that its conclusion does not follow from the premises presented. The argument can be broken down into a syllogism.

Major premise: The apostles, as the foundation of the church, experienced unique wonder-working powers to authenticate their ministry.

Minor premise: The apostles are dead.

Conclusion: No one experiences wonder-working power in ministry today.

The conclusion simply does not follow the minor premise. While we affirm that the apostles were uniquely gifted with miraculous powers, and it is certainly true that they are dead, it is not logical to conclude that no other Christian can experience the miraculous gifts. The same reasoning could be used when considering other works of the apostles. For example:

Major premise: The book of Acts tells us that the apostles planted churches.

Minor premise: The apostles are dead.

Conclusion: No one should plant churches today.

The strongest evidence refuting this premise is Scripture itself, giving evidence that Christians, other than the apostles, used the miraculous gifts.

Mark 9:38-39: An unknown man casts out demons in Jesus' name.

Luke 10:9: Jesus commissions seventy-two disciples to preach and to heal.

Acts 9:17-18: Anannias heals Paul.

Romans 12:6: Paul refers to the gift of prophecy in Rome, a church not yet visited by an apostle.

1 Corinthians 12:8-10: Gifts of healing and miracles are experienced in the Corinthian church without an apostle present.

Galatians 3:5: Paul refers to the Holy Spirit who "works miracle[s] among you." The word "you" is plural and must refer to the entire congregation, which was not led by an apostle.

1 Thessalonians 5:20: Paul demands that the Thessalonians not hinder the prophetic gift.

While the apostles were uniquely gifted, it cannot be inferred from Scripture that the miraculous gifts were limited to them or that they died with them.

Statement 3: Allowing miraculous gifts such as prophecy undermines the sufficiency of Scripture.

Being concerned with protecting the Scripture as the final and authoritative revelation of God's inerrant Word, one writer asks the question, "Is the Bible still being written?" then makes the following statement:

Christians on both sides of the Charismatic fence must realize a vital truth: God's revelation is finished for now . . . God's Word is complete. Jude encompasses the entire New Testament when he writes: 'Once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3). . . God worked through a certain historical process to establish the authenticity of the canon so we might have a clear standard. If we now throw out that historical process and redefine inspiration and revelation, we undermine the standard that God gave us. If we then undermine the uniqueness of the Bible, we will have no way of distinguishing God's voice from man's voice. Eventually anyone can say anything and claim it is God's Word, and no one will have the right to refute it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Church history provides sufficient basis for this concern. Many spurious groups have fallen into heresy when they moved away from the anchor of Scripture and began "hearing God". His warning regarding charismatic movements that equate "a word from God" with scriptural authority is appropriate and acknowledged. In addition, responsible non-cessationists agree that Scripture is sufficient and that there is no new authoritative revelation being given today.

When considering this argument, it is critical to understand that Paul's teaching regarding the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 does not equate the gift (in an authoritative sense) with that of the Old Testament Prophet. It was not Paul's intention to teach that those with the gift of prophecy would speak with the same authority as Isaiah or Jeremiah. God is not writing new scripture today and the Canon of Scripture *is* the definitive authority. Again, no responsible non-cessationist claims that contemporary prophetic gifts have such authority.

Disagreement arises with this assertion in another area. This view narrowly defines the word revelation (apokalypsis) as always referring to scriptural revelation, when in fact it does not. When Paul addressed the Corinthian church regarding their meeting together, he wrote, "When you come together, every one has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation." Paul goes on, demanding that the church test these revelations. His teaching clearly indicates that those speaking a revelation were not speaking with the authority of the Old Testament prophet, but that such revelations must be tested.

If the cessationist's argument were carried out to its logical conclusion, one would have to do away with the illuminating, guiding ministry of the Holy Spirit, as it would undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. Yet, it is widely agreed that the possibility of being guided by God in prayer does not compromise the sufficiency of Scripture.

Statement 4: Church history proves that all evidence of the miraculous gifts passed away after the first century.

In response, two observations are provided.

First, a study of church history actually proves the opposite. Such documents, such as The Didache (early 2nd century) through the writings of the reformers (including Martin Luther) indicate that the miraculous gifts were present. The following statements are provided as a sample of God's continued use of the miraculous gifts in His church. The first is a quote taken from a letter written by Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 100-165):

We do also hear many brethren in the Church who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men. . . .those who are in truth His disciples . . . do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe and join themselves to the Church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come; they see visions. . . . others still heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead have even been raised up and remained among us for many years.^{iv}

Origen, a third century writer , reported that signs and wonders validated the proclamation of the gospel:

The gospel has a demonstration of its own. . . . this . . . method is called by the apostle the "manifestation of the Spirit and of power:" of "the Spirit" on account of the prophecies, which are sufficient to produce faith in any one who reads them . . . and of "power", because of signs and wonders.^v

In providing counsel to a pastor who was ministering to a sick man, Martin Luther wrote:

I know of no worldly advice to give. If the physicians are at a loss to find a remedy, you may be sure that it is not a case of ordinary melancholy. It must, rather, be an affliction that comes from the devil and must be counteracted by the power of Christ and the prayer of faith.

Accordingly you should proceed as follows. . . . Graciously deign to free this man from all evil, and bring to naught the work that Satan has done in him. . . . then, when you depart, lay your hands on the man again and say, "These signs shall follow them that believe; they shall lay hands on the sick, and shall recover."^{vi}

In response to this argument, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

There is evidence from many of those Protestant Reformers and Fathers, that some of them had a genuine, true gift of prophecy. . . . read these books. . . . you will find the gift of prophecy . . . [and] the occasional miracle. Anyone who is prepared to say that all this ended with the apostolic age, and that there has never been a miracle since the apostles. . . gives the lie . . . [and] is to quench the Holy Spirit.^{vii}

There is evidence from historical record, that throughout history God is continuing to give the miraculous gifts to His church, although in varying degrees.

Second, if it could be proved that these gifts passed away in the history of the church, there is no proof, biblical or otherwise, that God would not grant them again.

Statement 5: The miraculous gifts were given only during the three periods of history when new revelation was given. Therefore, they are not being given today.

One proponent of this view states:

Most biblical miracles happened in three relatively brief periods of Bible history: in the days of Moses and Joshua, during the miracles of Elijah and Elisha, and in the time of Christ and the apostles. . . . All three periods of miracles were given in times when God gave his written revelation- Scripture, in substantial quantities.^{viii}

The primary problem with this argument is that a number of supernatural events occurred outside of these three periods of time. While there were times when the miraculous decreased, there may have been other reasons for the decline, such as rebellion and sin.

Perhaps equally significant is to note how far removed from Scripture the argument has come. Such statements of position hang on the thin thread of deductive reasoning, rather than specific Scripture. Such reasoning can always be countered with similar reasoning. For instance: while supernatural events may have been more prevalent during these periods of time, this does not prove that such events were nonexistent in other times, or that they may not occur during other periods of redemptive history. Again, Lloyd-Jones' comment is appropriate, "The Scriptures never anywhere say that these things were only temporary-never! There is no such statement anywhere."

Statement 6: Jesus says, "A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign" (Matt. 16:4). This means that we should not pray for the miraculous in our ministries today.

In Matthew 16, Jesus is addressing the Scribes and the Pharisees, who had come to test Jesus by asking for a sign. Having mocked Jesus with their request, He was rebuking these hard-hearted unbelievers. Rather, it should be noted how often Jesus compassionately responded to a request for a miracle.

In 1st Corinthians 14:1, Paul encouraged his readers to seek the miraculous gifts. In addition, John wrote that “many people saw the miraculous signs He was doing and believed in His name” (John 2:23).

Statement 7: Seeking miraculous gifts, especially in evangelism, devalues the primacy of the Word of God. The Bible alone is enough to save.

The Bible says that Scripture is the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Scripture alone is enough to save, as thousands have come to know Christ as Savior through preaching the word. However, to say that the display of the miraculous gifts devalues the primacy of the Word of God, is simply not true. The apostles themselves prayed that God would confirm their gospel with works of power. No one preached the word more powerfully than did the apostles. Yet, God chose to confirm His words through them with attesting signs and wonders. To say that the apostles needed this confirmation in the first century and that the church does not need them today is to say that the apostles needed more help than we do in preaching the gospel. If God used the miraculous to confirm His message during the ministry of His Son and the apostles, might He not use the miraculous now?

Statement 8. Jesus warns us that in the end times false prophets will work miracles and deceive the elect. Therefore, we should not seek miraculous gifts.

Because the enemy has always counterfeited the work of God’s Spirit, God provided for us, through Scripture, an approach to discerning between true and false prophets.

Matthew 7:15-17 (NASB) Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

1 John 4:1-6 (NASB) Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

The Bible also warns against false teachers in the end times. Does this mean that we should abandon the gift of teaching in fear of being deceived? We must beware of false teachers and prophets. The fact that Satan can counterfeit a ministry of the Spirit should not result in rejecting that ministry.

Statement 9. The epistles rarely speak of the miraculous gifts. This proves that these gifts passed away toward the end of the first century.

This is another line of deductive reasoning that says, because the gifts are not significantly discussed in the epistles, and because we do not find Epaphroditus, Timothy or Trophimus being healed, the miraculous gifts had passed away. This is an argument from silence, which is the weakest kind.

It is recognized that there is no explicit command in the epistles to evangelize. Should we conclude that by the end of the first century the apostles had stopped witnessing? Just because the men that Paul mentioned in his prison epistles were not healed does not mean he had lost his gift of healing. The Scriptures simply do not say why they were not healed. It is also recognized that when Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, he was in prison. Obviously, these letters would not be filled with stories of Paul working miracles.

In addition, it should be noted that while the book of Acts is narrative literature, in which Luke tells us about Jesus' continuing work through the church, the epistles were primarily letters written to churches dealing with specific problems (didactic literature). When there were problems related to gifts, Paul addressed it. Otherwise, there was no reason for the gifts to be mentioned.

Statement 10. The miracles worked by the apostles were always successful, instantaneous and on the hardest cases (such as organic illnesses like blindness or paralysis). If Jesus and the apostles were here today, they would be emptying the hospitals. The miracles of today are nothing like the ones in the Bible. This proves that the miraculous gifts have ceased.

We all recognize that the apostles, and certainly Jesus, operated at a level of supernatural power unknown to other Christians. But it does not follow that believers today cannot minister with these gifts at all. While present day believers may not witness with the same kind of power, yet they continue to witness. The same is true of these gifts: they may not be used with the power displayed by the apostles, but they are still used.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

“Have the miraculous gifts ceased?” may be the most widely discussed question within the evangelical community. One might ask how such differing views can emerge when we all believe the same Bible and have a deep personal love for our Lord. It is helpful to recognize that it took the early church until A.D. 381 (at Constantinople) to finally settle the doctrine of the Trinity, and until A.D. 451 (at Chalcedon) to settle the disputes over the deity and humanity of Christ in one person. We should not be surprised at the diversity of responses to this question, nor the fact that there is yet to be total agreement.

It is also helpful to recognize that, as time has passed, the depth of this discussion has deepened significantly. Many Christians (some of great scholarship) have entered into constructive, Bible-based and Spirit led dialogue concerning the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. For many, the study of God’s Word has resulted in a change of position. For some, it hasn’t. While the discussions may remain challenging, there is certainly an increased level of respect and love for one another.

One gracious by-product that has resulted from these discussions is a significant movement from the extremes to a reasonable understanding of the gifts themselves, as well as their place in the ministry of the church. There is an emerging and growing group of non-cessationist evangelicals who do not desire a label, such as “Pentecostal”, “Charismatic” (as the word is used in this discussion), or “Third Wave” (Vineyard Movement). This group simply desires to be a part of a thoroughly biblical church. As elders, we fall into this group, referring to ourselves as “open, but cautious”. As part of this group, we readily acknowledge that Scripture does not support the idea that the miraculous gifts ceased with the closing of the Canon of Scripture. At the same time, there remains great caution when considering the doctrine or practice of those who emphasize such gifts. Open to a clearer understanding and biblical use of these gifts, there remains concern about the possibility of abuses that have been witnessed and practiced by some. Holding a non-cessationist view, while also recognizing the possibility of abuse, we believe there is a reasonable response that will honor God and His gift of the Holy Spirit. A church that welcomes the power of the Spirit, while strictly adhering to the Bible, is God’s plan for meeting human needs and reaching this generation.

ⁱ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Sovereign Spirit: Discerning His Gifts* (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw, 1985), p. 33.

ⁱⁱ Lloyd-Jones, *Sovereign Spirit*, 31-33.

ⁱⁱⁱ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 165-166.

^{iv} Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ii.32.4, *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 4:397-98.

^v Origen, *Against Celsus*, I.2, *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, 4:397-98

^{vi} Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. Theodore Tappert, vol. 18 (Philadelphia: Westminster, n.d.), 52.

^{vii} Lloyd-Jones, *Sovereign Spirit*, 46.

^{viii} MacArthur, *Charismatics*, 112-14.

Additional Sources Include: Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology, An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); and Wayne A. Grudem, General Editor, *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?, Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996); and Doug Banister, *The Word and Power Church* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1999)