



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 6 – THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH
LESSON 109 – SPIRITUAL GIFTS: CESSATIONISM

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The Purposes for Miraculous Gifts

- ▶ Authentication: At critical times throughout redemption history, God authenticated His messengers by empowering them to perform miracles and signs.
- ▶ Revelation: This level of miraculous authentication was necessary at a time when the church was still being established and the Scriptures still being written. The Apostles and Prophets laid down the doctrinal foundation by direct revelation from the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:12-15; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Peter 3:15-16).
- ▶ Miracles are miracles because they are not “a regular part of people’s lives.” Miracles appear at special times, but never consistently throughout history. (Frame, pg. 928)

True Signs of the Apostles

- ▶ 2 Corinthians 12:12 refers to the miraculous gifts as the signs of the Apostles, with Paul using miracles as evidence of his apostleship. If everyone worked miracles this would make his statement nonsensical. In fact, there are only a few people in Scripture who exercised miraculous gifts – Jesus, the Apostles, Moses, Elijah, Elisha.
- ▶ Miracles are not a regular part of the Christian life. They may happen at God's pleasure, but even the Apostles at times could not perform miracles (Matthew 17:14-21).
- ▶ Most of what we see today claiming to be miraculous is exposed not by lack of results as much as by the abundance of unsound doctrine!

Cessationism

- ▶ Cessationism is the view that the sign gifts (performing miracles, speaking in tongues, etc.) and the revelatory gifts passed away when the foundation stage of the church ended.
- ▶ Continuationists teach that miraculous and revelatory gifts are still in operation today and are for all believers.
- ▶ The first test of continuation is settled quite matter-of-factly by the admission that there are no Apostles today. No one meets the criteria of being an Apostle today.
- ▶ This demonstrates that not everything that was normative for the early church period is normative for today, it shows that at least one category of gifting has ceased (Eph. 4:11), and it verifies that the canon of Scripture is in fact closed.

A Finished Foundation

- ▶ The foundation of the church consists of the Apostles and Prophets with Christ being the Cornerstone. With the completion of the canon, the foundation is laid. There is no need to add to the foundation and no other foundation can be laid (1 Cor. 3:11), so there is not a need for either authentication of ministry (outside of the self-authentication of Scripture) or of new revelation, since no one is to add to or detract from the Word received (Rev. 22:18-19).
- ▶ The Apostolic age ended with the death of John on Patmos, who himself was the last Apostle and last canonical prophet (Rev. 1:3).
- ▶ God's completed revelation is His written Word – its existence precludes the need for any other miracle or authentication.

A More Sure Word

- ▶ Peter explains that the prophetic Word (written Scripture) is even more sure than eye-witness experiences (2 Peter 1:16-21). In the all-sufficient Scriptures, God's truth is self-attesting and self-evident, as the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit confirms (Heb. 4:12).
- ▶ The Bible is all that is needed to validate the message of those who claim to be God's spokespersons. In fact, as is seen so often in continuationist circles, what is sacrificed for the sake of miraculous gifts is the very Word of God itself that the miracles first confirmed.

Test All Things

- ▶ The cessationist position is further validated by testing the use of modern charismatic gifts against the descriptions and rules for use given in the New Testament.
- ▶ God's Word clearly states that true prophets must adhere to the standard of 100 percent accuracy at all times (Deut. 18:20-22), and nothing in the New Testament exempts them from this standard.
- ▶ The Book of Acts depicts the gift of tongues as producing real, understandable human languages (Acts 2:6-11), and nothing in 1 Corinthians necessitates that they be redefined as something else. We covered the 3 abuses and 4 rules for tongue speaking last session.

Test All Things

- ▶ The New Testament describes miraculous healings (including the healing of organic diseases like paralysis, blindness, and leprosy) as being immediate, complete, confirmed, and undeniable (Mark 1:42; 10:52).
- ▶ By comparison, the modern counterfeits of the charismatic movement simply do not match up to their Biblical counterparts. In fact, most continuationists in the reformed camp are forced to describe the gifts today as being less than what we see in the New Testament, allowing for self-edification, false prophecies, unintelligible babbling, and just bad counsel based on imagination instead of illumination.
- ▶ Fraudulent gifts produce despair, bitterness, and doubt, whereas the Biblical gifts resulted in awe, wonder, amazement, and belief!

What About 1 Cor. 13:10?

- ▶ 1 Corinthians 13:8 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. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.
- ▶ Some appeal to this verse as a standard for setting a time for the expiration of the sign and miraculous gifts.

What About 1 Cor. 13:10?

- ▶ The Greek word translated “perfect” is *teleion*. It means “perfect, complete, free from any omission, deficiency, or corruption, fully developed, having reached its end, completely matured.”
- ▶ Some believe this refers to the completion of the canon, so we have the perfect Scriptures and no longer need authenticating or revelatory gifts.
- ▶ Some believe this refers to the return of Christ, as He is perfect and will usher in the perfect age in the new heavens and earth.
- ▶ We must note that a careful look at the context shows us that Paul is referring to the death of the Corinthian believers. His audience, receiving the letter, is being told that when they enter the perfection of eternity in heaven, when they are in fact perfect, complete, having reached their full maturity in Christ, then the gifts will no longer be needed. However, within the immediate context, love, the highest gift, has eternal value and will go on even after the believer’s death.

When Will/Did They End?

- ▶ To determine the point in church history that when the miraculous and revelatory gifts would pass away we must look beyond 1 Corinthians 13 to places like Ephesians 2:20 where Paul indicates that the prophetic offices were for the foundational age of the church.

What Cessationism is NOT

- ▶ Cessationism does not deny that God may perform supernatural miracles at any time (Psa. 115:3; Isa. 14:24, 27).
- ▶ Cessationism does not rely on the definition of “perfect” in 1 Cor. 13:10 to establish when the gifts will or have ended.
- ▶ Cessationism is not a rejection of the work of the Holy Spirit or the necessity of gifts within the church.
- ▶ Cessationism is not new. In fact, it is the charismatic movement that was “awakened” in the early 1800s where during the Second Great Awakening there were offshoot movements that included people “speaking in tongues, shaking and quaking, falling to the ground and barking like dogs, etc.” And most of this was dismissed as not being related at all to the work of the Spirit in renewal and revival. Of the early church fathers, the vast majority specifically referenced the end of the miraculous and revelatory gifts at the end of the Apostolic era.

Early Church Fathers

- ▶ John Chrysostom (c. 344–407): This whole place [speaking about 1 Corinthians 12] is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place.
- ▶ Augustine (354–430): In the earliest times, the Holy Spirit fell upon them that believe and they spoke with tongues, which they had not learned, as the Spirit gave them utterance. These were signs adapted to the time. For there was this betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues [languages] to show that the gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a sign, and it passed away.

Reformers - Luther

- ▶ Martin Luther (1483–1546): In the early Church the Holy Spirit was sent forth in visible form. He descended upon Christ in the form of a dove (Matt. 3:16), and in the likeness of fire upon the apostles and other believers. (Acts 2:3). This visible outpouring of the Holy Spirit was necessary to the establishment of the early Church, as were also the miracles that accompanied the gift of the Holy Ghost. Paul explained the purpose of these miraculous gifts of the Spirit in I Corinthians 14:22, “Tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not.” Once the Church had been established and properly advertised by these miracles, the visible appearance of the Holy Ghost ceased.

Reformers - Calvin

- ▶ John Calvin (1509–1564): Though Christ does not expressly state whether he intends this gift [of miracles] to be temporary, or to remain perpetually in the Church, yet it is more probable that miracles were promised only for a time, in order to give lustre to the gospel while it was new or in a state of obscurity. The gift of healing, like the rest of the miracles, which the Lord willed to be brought forth for a time, has vanished away in order to make the preaching of the Gospel marvellous for ever.

Puritans – Owen, Watson, Henry

- ▶ John Owen (1616–1683): Gifts which in their own nature exceed the whole power of all our faculties, that dispensation of the Spirit is long since ceased and where it is now pretended unto by any, it may justly be suspected as an enthusiastic delusion.
- ▶ Thomas Watson (1620–1686): Sure, there is as much need of ordination now as in Christ's time and in the time of the apostles, there being then extraordinary gifts in the church which are now ceased.
- ▶ Matthew Henry (1662–1714): What these gifts were is at large told us in the body of the chapter [1 Corinthians 12]; namely, extraordinary offices and powers, bestowed on ministers and Christians in the first ages, for conviction of unbelievers, and propagation of the gospel.

Particular Baptists – Gill, Spurgeon

- ▶ John Gill [Commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:9, 30] Now these gifts were bestowed in common, by the Spirit, on apostles, prophets, and pastors, or elders of the church, in those early times. When these gifts were in being, all had them not.
- ▶ Spurgeon: Take care never to impute the vain imaginings of your fancy to the Holy Spirit. I have seen the Spirit of God shamefully dishonored by people -- I hope they were insane -- who have said that they have had this and that revealed to them. There has not for some years passed over my head a single week in which I have not been pestered with the 'revelations' of hypocrites or maniacs. Semi-lunatics are very fond of coming with messages from the Lord to me, and it may save them some trouble if I tell them once for all that I will have none of their stupid messages. (cont'd)

Particular Baptists – Spurgeon

- ▶ When my Lord and Master has any message to me he knows where I am, and he will send it to me direct, and not by madmen. Never dream that events are revealed to you by heaven, or you may come to be like those idiots who dare impute their blatant follies to the Holy Spirit. If you feel your tongue itch to talk nonsense, trace it to the devil, not to the Spirit of God. Whatever is to be revealed by the Spirit to any of us is in the word of God already - He adds nothing to the Bible, and never will. Let persons who have revelations of this, that, and the other, go to bed and wakeup in their senses. I only wish they would follow the advice, and no longer insult the Holy Spirit by laying their nonsense at his door.

Particular Baptists – Spurgeon

- ▶ The works of the Holy Spirit which are at this time vouchsafed to the Church of God are every way as valuable as those earlier miraculous gifts which have departed from us. The work of the Holy Spirit, by which men are quickened from their death in sin, is not inferior to the power which made men speak with tongues.
- ▶ As a result of the ascension of Christ into heaven the church received apostles, men who were selected as witnesses because they had personally seen the Saviour—an office which necessarily dies out, and properly so, because the miraculous power also is withdrawn. They were needed temporarily, and they were given by the ascended Lord as a choice legacy. Prophets, too, were in the early church.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

- ▶ Once these New Testament documents were written the office of a prophet was no longer necessary. Hence in the Pastoral Epistles which apply to a later stage in the history of the Church, when things had become more settled and fixed, there is no mention of the prophets. It is clear that even by then the office of the prophet was no longer necessary, and the call was for teachers and pastors and others to expound the Scriptures and to convey the knowledge of the truth. Again, we must note that often in the history of the Church trouble has arisen because people thought that they were prophets in the New Testament sense, and that they had received special revelations of truth. The answer to that is that in view of the New Testament Scriptures there is no need of further truth. That is an absolute proposition. We have all truth in the New Testament, and we have no need of any further revelations. All has been given, everything that is necessary for us is available. Therefore if a man claims to have received a revelation of some fresh truth we should suspect him immediately.

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- ▶ The answer to all this is that the need for prophets ends once we have the canon of the New Testament. We no longer need direct revelations of truth; the truth is in the Bible. We must never separate the Spirit and the Word. The Spirit speaks to us through the Word; so we should always doubt and query any supposed revelation that is not entirely consistent with the Word of God. Indeed the essence of wisdom is to reject altogether the term 'revelation' as far as we are concerned, and speak only of 'illumination'. The revelation has been given once and for all, and what we need and what by the grace of God we can have, and do have, is illumination by the Spirit to understand the Word.