

“What We Believe: Cessationism”

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The First Baptist Church of Wellsburg teaches a “cessationist” understanding of the sign gifts:

“We believe that the Holy Spirit administers spiritual gifts to the church. The Holy Spirit glorifies neither Himself nor His gifts by ostentatious displays, but glorifies Christ by implementing His work of redeeming the lost and building up believers in the faith (John 16:13-14; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor 12:4-11; 2 Cor 3:18). God the Holy Spirit is sovereign in the bestowing of all His gifts for the perfecting of the saints today, and that speaking in tongues and the working of sign miracles in the beginning days of the church were for the purpose of pointing to and authenticating the apostles as revealers of divine truth, and were never intended to be characteristic of the lives of believers (1 Cor 12:4-11, 13:8-10; 2 Cor 12:12; Eph 4:7-12; Heb 2:1-4).” (Taken from “What We Believe,” accessible at www.wellsburgfirstbaptist.org)

What follows is a robust, comprehensive study of the biblical teaching on the matter.

Introduction

I love the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit regenerated me (Titus 3:5), sanctifies me (1 Pet 1:2), empowers me for service (Eph 3:16), seals me in Christ (Eph 1:13), and transforms me into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). He is part of the Godhead and must be understood in all truth.

The Spirit’s ministry of spiritual gifting has become misunderstood over the past century. Charismatic and Pentecostal circles have erred in doctrine and, as a result, practice. This has led to confusion over the function and biblical teaching of “sign gifts.” This paper seeks to bring the Word of God to bear on this category of spiritual gifts.

I pray that it is presented in all grace. There will be those who disagree with my conclusions who are genuinely saved and in the kingdom of God; they have a love for the lost and seek their conversion. This work is not done to discredit the faith of true believers, but to examine a specific doctrine of belief—one that I believe has implications for how the Christian life is lived.

What is “cessationism”?

I would probably fit most definitions of “cessationist.” I believe the practice of miraculous sign gifts¹ has ceased as the normal manifestation of the Holy Spirit. I believe that since the Spirit no longer distributes the miraculous sign gifts to individuals, we will not witness them as a regular

¹ Specifically, the gift of miracles, speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing.

feature in the life of the church. I believe God continues to do the miraculous—God does whatever He wants, whenever He wants (Ps 115:3). However, not every manifestation of sign gifts from the pages of Scripture will be present today.

What constitutes a “spiritual gift”?

A spiritual gift is a term used to describe a gift God grants to believers for the carrying out of the work of ministry. The term itself does not appear in the Bible.² The Scripture employs various terms from which we get our summary term “spiritual gift.”

Greek Term	Transliteration	English Term (NAS)	Reference
δώρατα	<i>domata</i>	“gifts”	Eph 4:8
πνευματικῶν	<i>pneumatika</i>	“spiritual gifts”	1 Cor 12:1
χαρίσματα	<i>charismata</i>	“gifts”	Rom 12:6
ἐνεργημάτων	<i>energemata</i>	“effects”	1 Cor 12:6
φανέρωσι	<i>phanerosis</i>	“manifestation”	1 Cor 12:7

There are four main passages that delineate specific gifts (Rom 12:3-8, 1 Cor 12-14, Eph 4:7-13, 1 Pet 4:10-11, 1 Cor 7:7). There is some debate about whether they are “natural talents” or entirely new.³ There are examples that seem to indicate both.⁴ Not all spiritual gifts need to be extraordinary (i.e. “giving” [Rom 12:8] or “administrations” [1 Cor 12:28]), but the Bible teaches they possess particular criterion. First Corinthians 12 teaches seven characteristics for spiritual gifts.

1. Holy Spirit-gifted people confess Jesus as Lord (vv.1-3).
2. All gifts originate from the Triune God (vv.4-6).
3. All Christians have at least one gift (v.7a).⁵

² Chad Brand, “Spiritual Gifts,” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1529.

³ James Stinzinger sees three possible categories: (1) the abilities and talents of the unbeliever or disobedient Christian; (2) the Spirit working through the dedicated life and talents of the believer in divine enablement, and (3) special, supernatural, extraordinary gifts bestowed upon a believer (first-century activity only). He believes “no valid distinction exists between dedicated abilities and spiritual gifts. As one dedicates his abilities to the Lord, the Spirit is able to work through him. These abilities become spiritual gifts” in “Spiritual Gifts: Definitions and Kinds” in *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 158-159.

⁴ Craig Blomberg, “Spiritual Gifts,” *Baker Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Instantaneously, in Acts 19:6, tongues and prophesy are given through the Apostle Paul’s laying on of hands. Galatians 1:15 may indicate Paul viewed his preparation as taking place over a lifetime.

⁵ Though additional gifts may be given, 1 Cor 12:7 teaches that a post-conversion experience (“Baptized in the Spirit”) is not necessary for a spiritual gifting.

4. Gifts are for the building up of the church (v.7b, “*common good*”).
5. There is a diversity of gifts (vv.8-10).
6. The Spirit distributes, as He wills (v.11).
7. The gifts are important for the church, though varied and different (vv.14-26).
8. (Chapter 13) A spiritual gift is worthless without love.

Is it possible to possess a spiritual gift for a time, then “lose” it? For example, can one enjoy the gift of teaching (Rom 12:7) and then suddenly teach poorly? Or could one be endowed with the gift of mercy (Rom 12:8), but suddenly find that mercy gone?

It does not seem so. We could list pastor-teachers who have fallen from grace. They committed serious sin years ago, but continued a robust, fruitful ministry of teaching all the while. Their gift to teach was not revoked, though we may think God should have. The Spirit does not bestow gifts based on conditions; since the gifts are not conditional, we should not expect them to be granted then revoked.⁶

Wayne Grudem concurs.⁷ He believes the NT pictures a permanent possession of spiritual gifts for three reasons. First, the “parts of the body” analogy of 1 Cor 12:12-26 fits this. Second, Paul gave titles to some of the gifts, indicating a continuing function (cf. 1 Cor 12:29, Eph 4:11). Thirdly, the language about gifts lends itself to permanence:

- “*If I have the gift of prophecy*” (1 Cor 13:3)
- “*If anyone thinks he is a prophet*” (1 Cor 14:37)
- “*Since we have gifts that differ*” (Rom 12:6)

Thus, as gifts are given by the Spirit, so they remain with the recipient. More specifically, *spiritual gifts* continue once gifted. But, biblical evidence reveals this is not true when it comes to the *sign gifts*. The sign gifts did not remain once gifted because the apostolic message was validated and there was no longer any need for them.

Consider the Apostle Paul. Paul’s gift of miracles and healing began to fade out over time. In Acts 19:11-12, “extraordinary miracles” were performed through Paul; in 20:7-12, he raises a young man from the dead; and in Acts 28:9, he heals the father of Plubius. This latter healing was the final recorded healing by Paul (60 AD, approximately). After that, he almost lost Ephaphroditus to an illness (Phil 2:27, 61-62 AD), he diagnosed wine for Timothy’s stomach (1 Tim 5:20, 63-66 AD), and he left Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Tim 4:20, 63-66 AD). I contend

⁶ Fred Zaspel, “Biblical Studies” (www.biblicalstudies.com). At this point, some may cite Rom 11:29—“For the gifts (χάρισμα) and calling of God are irrevocable” as a proof passage that a gift is given permanently. However, the context of Rom 11 seems to indicate that the gifts are probably His provision and protection of Israel.

⁷ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1025.

that the Apostle Paul did not heal these men because he could not heal these men. The sign gift of healing/miracles was slowly phasing out because his message as an Apostle was validated and the gospel was going forth.

What is a “sign gift”?

Theologians categorize the spiritual gifts in different ways. One way to categorize them is to differentiate the gifts that 1) equip believers for service from 2) “sign gifts” that authenticate the messenger and message. James Boyer writes, “a miraculous gift empowers an individual to perform an act in which God’s power is directly applied into natural order (i.e., into this timespace-mass continuum).⁸

There are then (2) main categories:

#1. *Spiritual gifts* for the body of Christ (1 Cor 12, Eph 4:12-13, 1 Pet 4:10-11)

#2. *Sign gifts* for the testimony of the Apostles (2 Cor 12:12, Heb 2:4)

Note the two verses that represent category #2.

- *The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs (σημείον) and wonders (τέραξ) and miracles (δύναμις). (2 Cor12:12)*

The signs of true apostles were threefold. The apostles persevered in displaying them. Their supernatural sign gifts from God were clear. Hebrews 2:4 also reveals the temporary nature of sign gifts.

- ³ *How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴ God also testifying with them, both by signs (σημείον) and wonders (τέραξ) and by various miracles (δύναμις) and by gifts (μερισμός) of the Holy Spirit according to His own will. (Heb 2:3-4)*

The author of Hebrews wrote that their shared salvation was “spoken through the Lord” (v.3b), after which “it was confirmed to us by those who heard” (v.3c). In other words, those who heard Jesus went on to perform supernatural deeds as a testimony to the faith. The text does not say anything about the recipients performing such wonders, rather *they observed* first-generation believers.⁹ The implication of this would be that the sign gifts lasted only so long as the eyewitnesses. Verse 3c indicates that such a testimony “was confirmed.” This is the past tense

⁸ Stinzinger, 161.

⁹ Hebrews was probably composed before 70 AD, possibly around 67 AD (David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, NAC, 78).

(Greek aorist). As Daniel Wallace has pointed out, “if such gifts continued, the author missed a great opportunity to seal his argument against defection.”¹⁰ The sign gifts validating the Lord’s witnesses (i.e. the disciples) passed away with those gifted to display them.

Arguments for Cessationism

The following sections provide evidence for the cessation of each individual sign gift. Additionally, arguments are presented for the cessation of the office of apostle. The sign gifts were interwoven with apostleship; it was by them that apostolic authority was seen as the early church was established and the biblical canon completed. One cannot claim the signs of an apostle without the office as well (2 Cor 12:12, Heb 2:4).¹¹ Indeed, if believers from all times are expected to perform sign gifts, we would see a consistent stream of apostles through all periods of church history down to even today.¹²

Every spiritual gift must be evaluated from a biblical perspective. The Bible is the final authority. As Stitzinger has observed, “false assumptions inevitably lead to wrong conclusions.”¹³ A redefining of the gifts is the source of significant confusion when it comes to discussions of the gifts today. We do not have permission to redefine the biblical descriptions of the gifts. If the sign gifts were still bestowed by the Spirit today, we should expect them to be *completely identical* to the descriptions of Scripture. This is a point worth bearing in mind as we now examine the office of apostle and the sign gifts. Examination of these matters must be predicated upon the Bible texts.

The following sections do this by exploring the 1) characteristics and the 2) functions of the sign gifts (and the office of apostle). Answering these “what” questions about the gifts means we do not need to answer the “when” question. If we know what the characteristics and functions of the gifts were, we can know when they ceased—or if they continue.¹⁴ We now turn to our first topic: the office of apostle.

The cessation of Apostles.

When the office of “Apostle” ceased, so too did the sign gifts. In order to be an apostle, one had to meet at least three necessary qualifications: (1) an apostle had to be an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22, 10:39–41; 1 Cor 9:1, 15:7–8); (2) an apostle had to be directly

¹⁰ Allen, 198.

¹¹ Stitzinger, 172.

¹² Richard Mayhue, “Cessationism: ‘The Gifts of Healing’ and Divine Healing” in *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 283.

¹³ Stitzinger, 7.

¹⁴ No Bible verse is needed that explicitly declares cessationism to prove it.

appointed by Jesus Christ (Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13; Acts 1:2, 1:24, 10:41; Gal 1:1); and (3) an apostle had to be able to confirm his mission and message with miraculous signs (Matt 10:1–2; Acts 1:5–8, 2:43, 4:33, 5:12, 8:14; 2 Cor 12:12; Heb 2:3–4). It is also worth noting that, in choosing Matthias as a replacement for Judas, the eleven also looked for someone who had accompanied Jesus throughout His entire earthly ministry (Acts 1:21–22, 10:39–41).¹⁵ When James, the brother of John died, he was not replaced (Acts 12:2) and Paul specifically stated that he was the last apostle (“last of all,” 1 Cor 15:8).¹⁶ Because of the criteria necessary to qualify for apostleship, we can conclude that Apostles do not exist today.

The Apostles fulfilled a foundational role for the church.

“¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” (Eph 2:19–20)

Paul used the term “household” as a metaphor for the church. The apostles and prophets laid the foundation. Now that the foundation is built and the structure established, it goes to follow that the foundation layers are no longer present (cf. Heb 1:2-3). Even as a continuationist, Grudem writes “God’s purpose in the history of redemption seems to have been to give apostles only at the beginning of the church age.”¹⁷

The earliest church fathers (those coming right after the apostles)¹⁸ and the testimony of Scripture confirms the cessation of apostleship. This is an important reality because of their connection to new revelation (prophecy) and the means God used to validate their foundational work (miracles, healing, and tongues). This argument alone does not prove cessationism, but it plays an important role in understanding how God employed sign gifts to build His church.

The cessation of the gift of “miracles.”

A miracle is a rare, extraordinary event wrought by God that cannot be explained by natural means in which he arouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to himself. The spiritual gift of miracle working is listed in 1 Cor 12:10 (cf. v.28). It is listed as “the effecting of miracles” (ἐνεργήματα δυνάμεων), literally “the working of powers.” What I am about to argue is that there are no miracles in the stricter sense of workers endowed with the spiritual gift of

¹⁵ Nathan Busenitz, “Historical Theology I,” Class Notes.

¹⁶ ἔσχατος – “Pertaining to being the final item in a series, least, last in time with reference to a situation in which there is nothing to follow” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Ed (BDAG). Early church fathers recognized this.

¹⁷ Grudem, 911, n.9.

¹⁸ The section “The Gifts in Church History” of this paper records their writings on the matter.

miracles performing miraculous signs to attest the redemptive revelation they bring from God. I believe that God is still working miracles today, but I do not believe that the ability to perform miracles is given as a spiritual gift by the Spirit.

Some may believe the Bible contains a proliferation of miracles from cover to cover. Yet, closely examined, we can observe that miracles are clustered in three main eras involving specific groups of people.

The vast majority of miracles occurred in the time of ...		
Moses and Joshua	Elijah and Elisha	Jesus and the Apostles
<i>Approx. 1441-1337 BC</i>	<i>Approx. 870-785 BC</i>	<i>Approx. 28-70 AD</i>
Exodus and Joshua	1 and 2 Kings	Gospels and Acts

Apart from these three unique periods of supernatural activity, miracles were the exception, rather than the norm (none of these periods lasted much more than 100 years). Even in these times, miracles were not normal, everyday occurrences. Each display of God was directly connected to the ministries of major biblical figures.¹⁹ Since their primary purpose was always to confirm the credentials of a divinely appointed messenger—one in whom God placed His words—we would not expect to see the gift of miracles today.²⁰

The letter to the church of Corinth contains the only mention of the gift of miracles in the NT (12:8, 28). This would place the unique era of miracle working through a gifting in the time of Jesus and the Apostles (specifically, the era of the book of Acts). No other NT letter epistle mentions the occurrence of miracles. I believe this is because they gradually faded away as the church’s foundational figures (the apostles) passed away. They fulfilled their purpose and met the criteria for a biblical miracle during their use.

¹⁹ There were miracles that occurred outside of these periods, such as the miraculous defeat of Sennacherib’s army (2 Kgs 19:2) and the preservation of Daniel’s friends (Dan 3).

²⁰ For example, Israel’s prophets were validated by signs and wonders (Deut 13:1-3), Elijah’s claim that Yahweh was the true God was validated by a sign (1 Kgs 18:36), and Christ’s claim as God’s Son was validated by miracles (John 5:36). Tom Pennnington, “A Case for Cessationism” at *The Strange Fire Conference* (October 17, 2013).

Any so-called miracles performed today must match the same characteristics of those performed in Scriptures. An article by Wayne Jackson in the *Christian Courier* nicely summarizes the marks of a genuine miracle.²¹ He begins by writing that supernatural displays of divine power are not an arguable proposition. Miracles are demonstrable facts. Nowhere in Scripture does one argue for their validity. Christ's opponents could not deny the effects of His miracles, but only attempt to attribute them to some other power (Matt 12:24). Secondly, behind every miracle was a worthy motive. The "faith healers" of the modern-day prosperity gospel heresy do not heal for noble purposes. Thirdly, miracles produced instantaneous and measurable results, susceptible to sense perceptions. The folks drinking the wine at the Cana wedding would validate that water was indeed wine (John 2:1-11). Consider elsewhere: Mark 10:52, "*Immediately he regained his sight.*" In Acts 3:7 the Apostle Peter performs a miracle of healing: "*And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened.*" The enactment of miracles was an irrefutable objective demonstration. Any miracle performed by one claiming to have the gift of miracles today must meet these characteristics of Scripture. I argue that such displays are not occurring at the hands of men endowed with the biblical gift of miracles because the gift has ceased.

The cessation of the "gifts of healings."

The "gifts of healings" correlates to "gift of miracles" in many sign gift discussions. First Corinthians 12 mentions the "gifts of healings" three times. It is only here that the "gifts of healings" are listed and it is one of the spiritual gifts written in the plural (*χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων*). That it is the only gift listed in the plural has raised some discussion.²²

Like the other spiritual gifts, any manifestation of the gift today will match the biblical characteristics. In the Bible, when God healed through His prophets, apostles, or Christ, each healing shared certain marks. The healing was immediate,²³ public, and occurred on ordinary, unplanned occasions. Additionally, healings included illnesses untreatable by the medical community, they were complete and irreversible, and undeniable—even to detractors.²⁴

The biblical pattern for healing is not operative today. There are many instances where we pray for people to be healed and they are. Praise God! That, however, is *answered prayer*, not the

²¹ Wayne Jackson, "What Does the Bible Say About Miracles?" *Christian Courier* (<https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/5-what-does-the-bible-say-about-miracles>).

²² Richard Mayhue comments on possible meanings for the plural construction: "(1) various methods of healing; (2) various occasions of healing; or (3) various bestowals of the gift. Because there are no other NT texts or contexts, no one knows for sure. 'Healings' most likely refers to various afflictions" (268-269).

²³ There were three "time delayed" healings by Jesus that consisted of a matter of minutes (Mark 8:22-26, Luke 17:11-19, John 9:1-7).

²⁴ Mayhue, 272.

biblical sign gift of healing in action. I believe that God does continue to heal in miraculous ways as He sovereignly chooses, just not through the apostolic sign of “gifts of healing.”

The cessation of the gift of “tongues.”

“Tongues” (γλῶσσα) are known languages.²⁵ Both Acts 2 and 1 Cor provide us with examples and instructions for the gift of tongues. The exact same phenomena of speaking previously unknown languages occurs in both the books of the Bible.

	Acts	1 Corinthians
Directly linked to the working of the Holy Spirit	2:4, 18; 10:44–46; 19:6	12:1, 7, 11, etc.
Evidence of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit	10:45	12:7
The supernatural ability to speak in other languages	2:4, 9-11	12:30; 14:2, 5 The fact that it can be interpreted indicates that it consisted of an authentic foreign language (12:10; 14:5, 13) ²⁶
The primary word for tongues is <i>glossa</i>	2:4, 11; 10:46; 19:6	12:10, 28; 13:1, 8; 14:2, 4, 5, 9, 13, 18, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27, 39
It was a “sign” for unbelieving Jews ²⁷	2:5, 12, 14, 19	14:21–22; cf. Isa. 28:11
It is closely connected with prophecy	2:16–18; 19:6	all throughout 12–14
Unbelievers accuse tongue-speakers of being ...	“Drunk” (2:13)	“Mad” (14:23)

The sign gift of tongues was for other people, too—not just the Apostles. In Acts 11:15-17, Peter implies that the tongues of Acts 10 were the same as those of Acts 2. Cornelius’ household (Acts 10) and the disciples of Apollos (Acts 19) would have spoken in tongues. Members of the church at Corinth also possessed the gift (1 Cor 14:18).²⁸

²⁵ Γλῶσσα is transliterated *glōssa*. The term was (and is) also used of the anatomical part of the mouth—the tongue (modern-day anatomy labels the tongue, “glossa”). While *glōssa* might refer to an anatomical tongue or a language, the other word used for language in Acts is διάλεκτος (it is used only for language—i.e. 1:19, 2:6).

²⁶ Paul directly associates tongue-speaking with foreign languages (14:10-11).

²⁷ Paul, the author of 1 Corinthians, calls it a “sign” in 14:22; Luke, the author of Acts, calls it a “sign” in 2:22.

²⁸ Busenitz, Class Notes.

When the biblical data on tongues is gathered together, we see (3) functions for the gifts. It follows that if there is no function for the gift remaining, the gift has ceased. First, tongues give evidence to the claims of the gospel. This should be no surprise, since the texts of 2 Cor 12:12 and Heb 2:4 teach this. The events of Acts 2 illustrate this. Jesus promised in Acts 1:5, “*you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*” Acts 2:4 records “*all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability*” (NRSV). This is also seen with Gentile belief in Acts 10 and Paul’s encounter with John’s disciples in Acts 19.

Second, tongues communicated the gospel in a foreign language. This is evident from Acts 2 where 18 different groups of people are listed as hearing people (Galileans) speak “*in our own languages*” (v.11, NRSV). (Interestingly, tongues also represent the movement of the gospel to include new groups as the narrative of Acts moves along: Jews, Samaritans (possibly), Gentiles, disciples of John.)

Thirdly, with a close correlation to prophecy, tongues was a means God employed to impart revelation to the NT church (Paul contrasts the use of tongues and prophecy in 1 Cor 14). He who speaks in tongues “speaks mysteries” (μυστήριον, 1 Cor 14:2).²⁹ Revelatory activity was busy during the birth of the church and tongues contributed to the establishment of our closed canon of Scripture.³⁰

With the function of tongues clarified, we turn to the biblical criteria for their use. Interestingly, without the problem-laden church at Corinth, we may not know the criteria for tongue-speaking. Specific guidelines were given by the Holy Spirit through Paul to the church.

1. Not everyone had the gift of tongues (1 Cor 12:30, cf. 12:10, 19).³¹
2. The value of tongues was in their being understood (1 Cor 14:6-20). Specifically, it was to be “clear” (“intelligible” [v.9, NIV], “easy to understand” [v.9, NKJV]) and distinct—as the notes of flute, harp, or bugle (1 Cor 14:7-9). Ecstatic utterances, mumbles, gibberish, babbling, and rambling—the nonsense “tongues” of the present day—are not languages and thus, are unintelligible as languages.
3. A spoken tongue was one of the “great many languages of the world” (1 Cor 14:10-11). They were pre-established by a people group somewhere and had meaning (v.11).

²⁹ Μυστήριον is used by Paul, John, and Jesus to refer to the giving of new revelations to the new covenant community (Matt. 13:11; Rom. 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:1, 7; 4:1; 15:51; Eph. 1:9; 3:3–4, 9; 6:19–20; Col. 1:25–27; 2:2; 4:3; 1 Tim. 3:9, 16; Rev. 10:7; 17:5–7). Chad Brand, “Gift of Tongues” in HIBD, 1605–1607.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ This first biblical criterion alone contradicts what many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches errantly teach their people.

4. Tongues were a sign for unbelievers, not believers (1 Cor 14:21-22). First Corinthians 14:21 quotes Isa 21:11 and points specifically to unbelieving Jews. It does not seem unreasonable, though, that tongues would be a sign for any unbeliever.
5. Uncontrolled speaking in tongues would lead an unbeliever to conclude madmen comprised the church (1 Cor 14:23).
6. Tongues were to be spoken in an orderly manner (1 Cor 14:26-33).
7. No more than two or three were to speak in tongues (1 Cor 14:27).
8. No one should speak in tongues unless someone was present to interpret what was said (1 Cor 14:13, 28).
9. Women were forbidden to speak in tongues (1 Cor 14:34-35).

If God's guidelines for speaking in tongues was followed today, how much would exist? When we consider the characteristics and function of the sign gift, we must conclude that the gift of tongues is no longer given by the Holy Spirit.

The cessation of the gift of “prophecy.”

God's prophets in the OT were His authorized spokesmen.³² Prophets (נְבִיאִים, the noun), prophesied (נָבֵא, the verb). The primary means that God used to communicate to them were direct encounters, dreams, and visions.³³ There were false prophets in the era of OT history, but God's prophets were men and women of truth. His standard was laid out in Deut 13:1-5, 18:18-19:

¹ “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ² and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ ³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ⁴ “You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. ⁵ “But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you. (Deuteronomy 13:1–5)

³² God also selected women to prophesy on His behalf. Consider Deborah (Judg 4:4) and Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14).

³³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1769.

²² “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him. (Deuteronomy 18:22)

Prophecy was thus authoritative, 100% accurate, and inspired human reports of error-free revelation from Almighty God.³⁴

Prophecy in the NT is the same as prophecy in the OT. Scripture never distinguishes OT prophecy from NT prophecy. In the NT, identical terminology is used to refer to both OT and NT prophets and prophecy side-by-side. Old Testament prophets are mentioned in Acts 2:16; 3:24, 25; 10:43; 13:27, 40; 15:15; 24:14; 26:22, 27; and 28:23. References to NT prophets (προφήτης) and prophecy are interspersed without any distinction or comment (Acts 2:17–18; 7:37; 11:27, 28; 13:1; 15:32; 21:9–11).³⁵ Because the age of the apostles was also an age of revelation, we know that the office and function of prophecy is the same in the OT and NT.

As a spokesman for God, the NT prophet *foretold* (predicted) and *forth-told* (preached). Both occurred on the basis of supernatural knowledge (cf. 2 Pet 2:20-21); Paul made this clear in 1 Cor 13:2, 14:29-30 (1 Cor 14:26 distinguished a “teaching” [διδάχη] from a “revelation” [ἀποκάλυψις]). Prophecy is different than preaching (or teaching). Prophecy is based wholly upon supernatural divine revelation. Preaching/teaching are based upon the Bible text.³⁶ While the OT/NT prophet bears similarities to preachers/teachers, the source of his message was different than the NT preacher/teacher.

One argument I maintain through all the sign gifts is that they ceased with the cessation of the office of apostle. We know to be true of prophets, as well. The grammatical construction of Eph 2:20 teaches this. Ephesians 2:20 teaches that the church was “built on the foundation of the apostles *and* prophets.” The conjunction “and” inseparably links the two offices together. Grammatically, this verse can only refer to NT prophets—they are linked to the NT office of apostle. The grammar of this passage does not allow for one office to be existing and one office to have ceased (i.e. the construction of the sentence does not allow us to say prophets continue,

³⁴ Some continuationists will claim that the prophecy of Agabus in Acts 21:10-11 was wrong. This claim is made to legitimize the practice of errant prophecy in the church today. Modern advocates try to prove text their belief in present day prophecy, saying *it is possible to have the gift and be wrong*. However, their arguments are not convincing and we have at least (5) reasons to believe Agabus was accurate: (1) nothing in the text says he got it wrong, (2) Luke later implies he was right—compare Acts 21:27, 30-32, (3) Paul’s testimony in Acts 28:16-17 strengthens Agabus’ prediction, (4) Agabus is quoting the Holy Spirit in Acts 21:11, and (5) no one in church history is accusing Agabus of errant prophecy until recent times. Nathan Busenitz, “Throwing Prophecy Under the Agabus,” The CrippleGate (<http://thecripplegate.com/throwing-prophecy-under-the-agabus/>).

³⁵ Sam Waldron, *To Be Continued?*, 68.

³⁶ Sam Storms, “What Does Scripture Teach About the Office of Prophet and Gift of Prophecy?,” The Gospel Coalition, (www.thegospelcoalition.org).

but apostles have ceased). Like the apostles, prophets were foundational to the establishment of the church. And, like the apostles, they are no longer on the scene.³⁷

Prophets and prophecy ceased because the biblical canon is now closed. The “God told me” claims of the Charismatic do not match what the Bible teaches us about a closed canon of Scripture.³⁸

The book of Revelation—clearly a NT prophecy—closes with a warning:

¹⁸ I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:18–19)

God is not adding to His Word. No one is to add to His revelation, nor detract from it. The prophets and their prophecies of the OT and NT eras are no longer present because God has graciously revealed all He wishes us to know, recorded on the pages of sacred Scripture. In the words of John Owen, “If private revelations agree with Scripture, they are needless, and if they disagree they are false.”

The Gifts in Church History

The church fathers are significant figures in the history of the Christian faith. They are influential men who followed the Apostles, leading and guiding Christ’s church. The church fathers occupied an important place in church history and they recognized the cessation of the office of apostle.

Ignatius (c. 35–115) in his *Epistle to the Magnesians*, wrote (speaking in the past tense): “The people shall be called by a new name, which the Lord shall name them, and shall be a holy people.” This was first fulfilled in Syria; for ‘the disciples were called Christians at Antioch,’ when Paul and Peter were laying the foundations of the Church.”

Irenaeus (c. 130–202) in *Against Heresies*, echoes the past tense understanding that Peter and Paul laid the foundations of the Church (in 3.1.1) and later refers to the twelve apostles as “the twelve-pillared foundation of the church” (in 4.21.3).

³⁷ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Advanced Greek Grammar*, 284–286 for a fuller treatment of the grammar of the passage.

³⁸ There are many making these erroneous claims today—people like Oral Roberts, Linda Fehl, Jack Hayford, Larry Lea, and Kenneth Hagin. Prosperity Gospel preacher Jesse Duplantis even claims God spoke to him, revealing that owning just one private jet was letting his “faith stagnate.”

Tertullian (c. 155–230), in *The Five Books Against Marcion* (chapter 21), notes the importance of holding to apostolic doctrine, even in a post-apostolic age: “No doubt, *after the time of the apostles*, the truth respecting the belief of God suffered corruption, but it is equally certain that during the life of the apostles their teaching on this great article did not suffer at all; so that no other teaching will have the right of being received as apostolic than that which is at the present day proclaimed in the churches of apostolic foundation.” (Emphasis added)

They early church fathers also recognized the cessation of the sign gifts, particularly the gift of tongues.

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 Ghost fell upon them that believed: 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 behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away.

Theodoret of Cyrus (c. 393–c. 466): In former times those who accepted the divine preaching and who were baptized for their salvation were given visible signs of the grace of the Holy Spirit at work in them. Some spoke in tongues which they did not know and which nobody had taught them, while others performed miracles or prophesied. The Corinthians also did these things, but they did not use the gifts as they should have done. They were more interested in showing off than in using them for the edification of the church. . . . Even in our time grace is given to those who are deemed worthy of holy baptism, but it may not take the same form as it did in those days.

Chrysostom: "The Corinthians thought that speaking in tongues was a great gift because it was the one which the apostles received first, and with a great display. But this was no reason to think it was the greatest gift of all. The reason the apostles got it first was because it was a sign that they were to go everywhere, preaching the gospel." (John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, 35.1. Cited from 1–2 Corinthians, ACCS, 138 in reference to 1 Cor 14:2.)

Why Does Cessationism Matter?

Alright, so no one is actually speaking in natural foreign languages, being carried from place to place by the Spirit, healing the lame, raising people from the dead, healed by touching a handkerchief, or impervious to snake bites. But, so what? What does cessationism mean for us today?

1. Doctrine leads to practice.

We see this time and again in the church and in life. If we believe the Bible teaches that the sign gifts have not ceased, then as obedient Christians, we must practice them in our church. We must figure out who the apostles are and get them to testify to their office through “signs and wonders” (Heb 2:4, cf 1 Cor 12:12). We must practice miracles, healings, and speaking in tongues. We must also seek prophecies to hear God’s latest revelations. If cessationism is wrong, cessationist churches must begin practicing the gifts. And, I would argue, almost all continuationist churches must begin practicing the gifts *according to the Bible*.

2. We are making statements about God.

The Holy Spirit is God. The Bible reveals a glorious array of activities by the Spirit. We live in an age of abysmal doctrines. We must not allow His name to be hi-jacked by those who would seek to abuse it. We are stating that we stand on the biblical revelation of the Holy Spirit’s ministries, respecting those areas that have ceased. Like the continuationists, we are making some serious statements about who God is. It is vital that we get our pneumatology (doctrine of the Holy Spirit) and our ecclesiology (doctrine of the church) correct because we will stand before God for our beliefs.

3. Scripture is elevated over experience.

Scripture as the ultimate authority is not the popular position today (historically, it is). Charismatics and Pentecostals elevate subjective experiences over divine truth. Sound biblical doctrine has taken a back seat to feelings and emotions. Cessationism is not popular with many because it prioritizes a deep, robust examination of spiritual gifts over and above temporary emotions. Cessationism believes that the path to genuine emotional experience—and believe me, the presence of God will bring this—is through sound doctrine. We start and end with the Bible, rather than bring it along as it applies to our subjective experiences.

4. Discernment in partnerships.

As a church we will and will not partner with various churches for various reasons. Discernment must be used in partnerships. Continuationism is a topic that must be considered in some of these partnerships, depending upon the event. Additionally, our giving as a church must be evaluated according to the Scriptures. A church of integrity gives to missionaries and ministries where there is doctrinal agreement.

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