

The Cessationist and Continuationist Perspectives

Lesson 1: The School of the Holy Spirit

What is a Cessationist?

“A cessationist is someone who believes that particular spiritual gifts, typically those of a more supernatural nature, ceased to be given by God to the church sometime late in the first century AD (or more gradually through the course of the next few centuries).”

- Dr. Sam Storms

What is a Continuationist?

“A continuationist, by contrast, is a person who believes that all the gifts of the Spirit continue to be given by God and are therefore operative in the church today and should be prayed for and sought after.” - Dr. Sam Storms

Why do Cessationists believe that the supernatural gifts of the Spirit are no longer available today and how would Continuationist respond to these arguments?

1. THE PERFECT HAS NOW COME.

The Cessationist's Argument:

When the “perfect has come” or “when completeness comes”, the imperfect will pass. The perfect and completeness was talking about

the full canon of Scripture. As the Bible came, the miraculous gifts were no longer necessary.

- *“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.” (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)*

The Continuationist’s Response:

“The perfect” or “completeness” is not a reference to the canon of Scripture being closed, but pointing towards the glorious state that we will enter into at the end of this age, when Jesus establishes “a new heavens and a new earth” (Revelation 21:21). That is when we will no longer need spiritual gifts, when the Kingdoms of this world have become the Kingdoms of our Lord. Right now, we don’t see Jesus face to face and we don’t know fully, but in part.

- *“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:11-12)*

- *“Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:7-8)*

2. THE APOSTLES ARE GONE.

The Cessationist’s Argument:

The miraculous gifts served to validate the original apostles. When the original apostles passed, so did the supernatural along with them.

- *“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.” (1 Corinthians 12:12)*

The Continuationist’s Response:

The Scriptures do not teach that signs, wonders, and miracles were validating the apostles, but rather message of Jesus Christ.

- *“God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” (Hebrews 2:4)*

The purpose of the supernatural gifts, were not merely to identify the apostles, but also to (1) reveal God’s compassion, (2) to propel

evangelism, (3) to bring glory to God, (4) to express love in the church, (5) to build up the church, (6) and the equip the saints for their ministry and (7) to lead us to greater unity.

Signs, wonders, and miracles themselves should not be why we follow someone, because they can be performed by false Christs and false prophets.

- *“For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders that would deceive even the elect, if that were possible.” (Matthew 24:24)*

How do we account for all the people who aren't apostles— who moved in signs, wonders, and miracles?

- Jesus sent the 72 disciples to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons (Luke 10:1-23). Were they all apostles or just disciples?
- Philip and Stephen were also used in supernatural and miraculous ways. They were deacons, not apostles.
 - *“When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed.” (Acts 8:6-7)*

- *“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.” (Acts 6:8)*
- Were the four daughters of Philip, apostles (Acts 21:9)?
- Jesus said that signs would follow “those who believe”, not just these apostles.
 - *“And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.” (Mark 16:17-18)*

3. THE BIBLE IS ALL WE NEED.

The Cessationist’s Argument:

Since we now have the complete canon of Scripture, we don’t need the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. The Scriptures alone are sufficient for evangelism and spiritual growth.

The Continuationist’s Response:

These supernatural gifts were necessary for building up the early church (1 Corinthians 12:7 1 Corinthians 14:3-5,26) and were dynamic tools for evangelism in the first century (Matthew 10:8).

- We still need these supernatural gifts to build up the church today and to accompany our preaching. The fastest growing religion

today that is growing through conversions is Pentecostalism in Asia, South America, and Africa — very much do to signs, wonders, and miracles. More than 80% of those who confess faith in Jesus are continualists.

- If signs, wonders, and miracles were used to confirm the ministry of Jesus during His earthly ministry and the preaching of the gospel in the first century, why not in this century? Did not Jesus promise we would do the works He did? (John 14:12)

Are our natural gifting (teaching, administration, hospitality) mixed with Bible preaching enough to defeat the Devil and expand the Kingdom of God?

It is a stretch to assume that God is saying, “Since a Bible is down there, we don’t need any demonstrations and manifestations of My Spirit’s power.”? That’s now what God thought when His Son was walking the earth.

4. SPIRITUAL GIFTS MAY REPLACE SCRIPTURE.

The Cessationist’s Argument:

If people start prophesying today, it will begin to blur and trump the Scriptures. Thus, you can’t say God is still speaking. Otherwise, we will keep adding to the Bible.

The Continuationist's Response:

We don't put prophetic words and revelatory gifts on the same level as the Holy Scriptures.

- We are commanded to test the prophetic utterances (1 Corinthians 14:29), and one of the ways we judge prophetic utterances is by seeing if it aligns with Scripture. If it does not, we don't take it seriously (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21).
- The Scriptures are useful for “correcting” and “reproving” and one of the things they correct and reprove are utterances that people think are “prophetic” yet they contradict Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16).

5. WE DON'T SEE THE SAME KIND OF MIRACLES.

The Cessationist's Argument:

We don't see the quality of miracles or gifts displayed today that was characteristic of the ministry of Jesus or the Apostles.

The Continuationist's Response:

What does not seeing the supernatural gifts on the level of Jesus or the Apostles have to do with us believing that they are no longer in operation today?

- If we can't love like Jesus, should we not love?
- If we can't teach like Paul did, should we not teach?

- If we can't pray like the early church, should we not try to pray?
- If we can't encourage like Barnabas, should we not step out to love and encourage someone?
- If we can't evangelize like Stephen and Philip, should we not evangelize?
- If we aren't selling all of our belongings and bringing them to the apostle's feet, should we not be generous?

Why are we allowing our experiences to override what the Scriptures reveal and command?

- The New Testament presents 155 verses that describe or portray Spiritual gifts and 65 verses that present signs, wonders, and miracles.

Do we put our faith in our experiences or lack of experiences, rather than what the Scriptures teach and command?

- We seek to have our experiences to line up with the Scriptures rather than twist Scripture to fit our experiences or lack of experiences.

6. THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT DIMINISHED OVER TIME.

The Cessationist's Argument:

This is just not the era in history, where God is moving like that upon the earth. Paul the Apostle went from being able to heal through his handkerchiefs, to now advising Timothy to take wine for his stomach issues (1 Timothy 5:23). He left his friend, Trophimus, sick and not healed (2 Timothy 4:20). His assistant, Epaphroditus, was sick to the point of death (Philippians 2:25-30).

During the second, third, and fourth century there is an apparent a waning of God's power from the book of Acts.

The Continuationist's Response:

We should not be presumptuous about what God is doing on the earth.

- Do we know everything happening in the Middle East?
- Do we know all that's taking place in underground churches?
- Do we know all that transpires on the mission fields with unreached people groups?

If prophetic gifting and healing power is rare, maybe we should be asking, why?

- In the time of Gideon, the miracles were only talked about, but were not seen. Gideon is asking, "where are all his wonders...?" God would be raising up Gideon and would work through him in a supernatural way.

- *“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.” (Judges 6:13)*

- In the Old Testament, the voice of the Lord was rare during the leadership of Eli. There was so much corruption in leadership (1 Samuel 1-2). There was not a true God seeker. When Samuel was willing to hear and obey God’s voice, things shifted for the nation. So, was the spiritual famine the result of God not wanting to speak or leaders not wanting to hear?
 - *“The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; There were not many visions.” (1 Samuel 3:1)*

- During the ministry of Jesus, He could not do many mighty works in Nazareth because of their unbelief and lack of honor. He still healed a few by laying hands on them, but there was not the same release because of the lack of faith (Matthew 13:58). On the contrary, faith filled women and men, like Mary mother of Jesus (John 2:5), the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:26-57), the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:8), pulled out the supernatural power of God.

- The last chapter of Acts has Paul healing everyone on the island of Malta. It does not seem like the gift of healing was wearing out.
- *“His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured.” (Acts 28:8-9)*

The evidence that the supernatural gifts went away after the apostles is simply not there.

- The **Didache** or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, a church manual that likely originated in Syria/Palestine in c.100, still deals with the gift of prophecy as if it were a standard practice within the Church.
- Around c.155-160, **Justin Martyr**, said in his Dialogue with Trypho that the prophetic gifts formerly belonging to the Jews were now at work in the Church (Dialogus cum Tryphone 82, 1; Goodspeed 1914:194; Marcovich 1997:212). In his (second) Apology, Justin deals in no short way with the contemporary healings of demon-possessed persons in Rome, describing such healings as gifts of the Holy Spirit (Apologia II, 5-6; Krüger 1968:65; cf. Marcovich 1994:38-40).
- In about 185, **Irenaeus of Lyon**, a church father, provided us with a great deal of information about glossolalia (tongues), prophecy and

healing, as is evident from the following two citations. It is clear that this bishop of Lyon (in ancient Gaul) thinks of the charismata as living realities in the church of his time: “In like manner, we also hear that many brethren in the church, who have prophetic charismata, speak in all kinds of tongues through the Spirit and reveal the hidden things of people, for their benefit, and explain the mysteries of God ... (Adv. Haer. 5, 6, 1; SC 153, 73f.)

- **Tertullian** (3rd century) mentions, amongst other things, prophecy, visionary experiences, spontaneous prayer, tongues and healings as gifts of the Spirit. “Therefore, you, the blessed ones, whom the grace of God awaits, when you arise from that most holy bath of rebirth and, for the first time, stretch out your hands with your brothers to your mother (= the church), ask from the Father, ask from the Lord, as a special gift of His grace, the distributions of the charismata.” (De baptismo 20, 5; CCL 1, 295; SC 35, 96)

The famine of God’s power may be because, like in the Old Testament examples:

- (1) people departed from the Lord,
- (2) there were less leaders who walked with God,
- (3) and there was lack of faith.

- **There was an increase of corruption from the fourth century, the church was now Romanized and paganism crept in.**

- In the first three hundred years, Christians were persecuted and most likely the ones who were following Jesus really believed in Him. During these difficult decades, the body of Christ grew drastically to approximately 3 million or more.
- Emperor Constantine (272-337) brought notable changes that seemed in favor of the Christians: “The Edict of Milan was issued in 313 CE, with the added stipulation that Christian property that had been confiscated or destroyed would be returned or compensated with funds....The Edict of Milan now granted Christians throughout the Empire toleration and permission to meet in their assemblies and so legalized the movement.” - Constantine’s Conversion to Christianity, www.Worldhistory.org
- When Emperor Constantine gifted fancy buildings, however, this is when pagan worship and Christianity began to mix. One of the major shifts was to create greater distinctions between clergy and laity, so the “average person” was not able to minister in their gifts. The clergy then were often corrupt, they were professional orators not true servants of God and lovers of Jesus (Pagan Christianity, Frank Viola). Being Christian was now so convenient, one did not even have to truly be convert.
- **For much of church history, Christians did not have their own Bibles.**

- It was not until the Reformation. Prior to the Reformation, Scripture was in the hands of the clergy until the Reformation, was not readily available until the printing press, and people were not widely literate.
- **Some truths can get lost and need to be recovered.**
 - The teaching of justification by grace through faith was what the apostles taught. However, it got lost and was not reclaimed until the Reformation. Does that mean that God was no longer justifying people through faith, just because we lost the revelation of it?
- **The Reformers were generally not into miracles. Why?**
 - The Catholic Church was boasting that they originated from Peter and their church is the true church because it has been marked by the miraculous.
 - John Calvin pushed back on that and dismissed miracles as the works of Satan. Calvin taught that the purpose of miracles was to validate the apostles and miracles have now ceased. Calvin pushed for correct doctrine as the proof of the true church, not signs, wonders, and miracles.

7. NEGATIVE OR NO EXPERIENCES WITH THESE KIND OF GIFTS.

The Cessationist's Argument:

We have not experienced these supernatural gifts. And/or we had negative experiences with people who were trying to practice these supernatural gifts. We have seen hyper charismatic churches drift from the Word of God and implode.

Flamboyant public personalities have abused these “gifts”, and we want nothing to do with them.

The Continuationist's Response:

If we don't believe in the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, and we are in churches that don't believe in them or practice them, it is very likely we will not experience them.

The proper response to abuse is not no use, but rather proper use. Rather than overreacting to error, we are called to be devoted to the truth.

Just because someone has taken these tools and used them for selfish gain, does that mean we should not be pursuing these gifts to use to edify others and for the glory of God?

Does someone's messiness somehow release me from my calling to “Earnestly desire spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1)?

- If a pastor, fails, should no one try to pastor again?

- If a church does damage to people, should we not plant anymore churches?
- If someone gets a divorce, does that mean none of us should be married?

“When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” (John 21:21-22)

Following Jesus mean that we spend time with Him and we start looking more like Him in character and we start doing the works that He did.

- *“Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” (John 14:12)*

APPENDIX: SUPERNATURAL GIFTS IN CHURCH HISTORY

The names of the people through whom the Spirit's power was demonstrated and manifested:

- Polycarp (69-155)
- Origen (185-253)
- Clement of Alexandria (150-215)
- Gregory the Wonderworker (213-270)
- Anthony the Great (251-356)
- Cappadocian Fathers (330-389)
- Augustine of Hippo (354-430)
- Augustine of Canterbury (5??-604)
- Saint Patrick (401-500)
- John Climacus (579-649)
- Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)
- Thomas Aquino's (1125-75)
- Catherine of Siena (1347-80)
- Francis Xavier (1506-1552)
- Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)
- Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)
- Vincent of Ferrier (1350-1419) -
- John of the Cross (1542-91)
- John Knox (1514-1572)
- George Fox (1624-1619)
- Seraphim of Sarov (1754-1833)
- Andrew Murray (1794-1866)
- Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)
- A.B. Simpson (1843-1919)
- Carrie Judd Montgomery (1858-1946)
- Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944)
- John Wimber (1934-1997) -
- Heidi Baker (1959-)