



The
HOLY SPIRIT'S GIFTS
NEVER STOPPED



The gifts of the Spirit did not “cease” after the book of Acts, here’s why “cessationism” is a false and misguided doctrine

BY RYAN JACKSON

More and more Christians today seem to be struggling with the ongoing, present working of the Holy Spirit. There seems to be an increase of attention to teaching that suggests the gifts of the Spirit ended with the days of the early apostles. I believe we need the Holy Spirit’s gifts today like never before. But how do we address those who insist that God’s power is no longer available to us?

Ceasing What?

Cessationism is the belief that some (if not all) the miracle gifts (like healing) and the revelatory gifts (like tongues and prophecy) ceased with the age of the apostles. Popular cessationist Bible teachers like John MacArthur even go so far as to argue that the Pentecostal/charismatic movement is a blasphemous aberration of biblical teaching and that it has done more damage to the body of Christ than any other movement in history. The opposite view—that the gifts of the Spirit continue and are available to believers today—is called continuationism.

If cessationism seems to be gaining some ground, there may be multiple reasons for this. First, we have to admit that some Pentecostals and charismatics have demonstrated serious spiritual immaturity and lack of understanding of the Word of God. Extremes and abuses distract from the genuine work of the Spirit. Yet, even in ancient Corinth, where there were many abuses of spiritual giftings, the apostle Paul not only tolerated but encouraged Christians to pursue the gifts of the Spirit. We’ll return to this idea later.

Second, some people are drawn to the intellectual presentation of the faith. This should be welcomed and celebrated, but we should avoid reducing the faith to only loving God with the mind. Jesus instructs us there is more to knowing and loving God than that. In the words of J.K.A. Smith, “The way we ‘know’ is more like a dance than deduction.”

Third, many cessationists have a very high view of Scripture. This brings a welcome corrective to false teaching that finds its way into the church. However, elevating Scripture to the place of God Himself is a subtle form of idolatry. It misunderstands the nature and work of the Holy Spirit and leads inadvertently to a misconstrual of the Trinity as “Father, Son and Holy Scripture.” The Holy Spirit is a person—an eternal person. And He longs for genuine relationship and ongoing communion with His people.

The great irony is that the Bible itself never articulates the fundamental premise of cessationism. To

the contrary, the Bible affirms and encourages the fullness of the work of the Spirit in the lives of believers without hesitation or apology. The overwhelming witness of the New Testament supports a continuationist view of Scripture. Given the continual, consistent testimony of the early church in the book of Acts, we would need unmistakable apostolic teaching to alter the self-evident nature of the Spirit-filled community demonstrated there. That teaching simply does not exist in the Bible.

Let's begin by noting some of cessationism's major objections to the current functioning of the miracle/revelatory gifts of the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:20

This passage is a go-to text for cessationists. It teaches that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." After the foundation is laid, cessationism argues there is no further need for continued foundational work. The foundation of faith taught by the original apostles was the "faith that was once for all delivered to the saints," (Jude 3).

We agree that the prophetic work of the apostles was foundational to the establishment of the church. However, Ephesians 2:20 does not require us to hold that once

the church has been laid. However, this is not an assertion of the text itself. Just because apostles were used by God to found the church doesn't mean that was their only function.

Later in Ephesians, we hear another function of the apostolic and prophetic giftings of the Spirit. In Ephesians 4:11-12, we are told that God gives these gifts to the church to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." Here, Paul lists apostles and prophets along with evangelists, shepherds and teachers. He makes no division in his list of gifts in Ephesians 4. He gives no indication that one part of the list would still be valid while the other is not.

Using the same building metaphor, he had employed earlier, Paul explicitly speaks to the roles of apostles and prophets not just as foundational but also as important for the continuation of the building. Unless we are to believe that the building was completed in the first century, the most straightforward reading of this text is that both apostles and prophets, like evangelists, pastors (shepherds) and teachers, continue to be used by God to equip and edify the church for its missional work in the world.

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the gift was used to establish the church the gift ceased to function. It merely asserts that the gift was used foundationally.

Consider this example. We might argue that the intense intellectual giftings of America's founding fathers were foundational for the nation. However, we wouldn't also be implying by that assertion that after the nation's birth their intellectual gifts no longer operated or were not useful for the furtherance of the new country's expansion.

Likewise, Ephesians 2:20 is sometimes used to argue that the apostles themselves were foundational and are therefore no longer needed since the foundation of

Hebrews 2:3-4

Cessationists point out the progression of revelation in this passage. It was: 1) declared at first by the Lord; 2) attested to us by those who heard; and, 3) borne witness by signs, wonders, miracles and gifts of the Spirit. This progression is obvious and agreed upon, but it's the next logical leap that is problematic. Some cessationists argue from this progression that since the signs, wonders, miracles and gifts served to confirm the ministry of the apostles, once their ministry was attested (past tense), there would be no further need for these functions. However, this logic is strained at best.

The word *contested* in Hebrews 2:3 means, "to confirm or establish." As we argued above, just because these supernatural operations were foundational doesn't mean that they must cease when the foundation is laid. Perhaps the most condemning argument against the cessationist interpretation of this verse is that the text does not specify who is performing the signs, wonders, miracles and gifts. To limit the application of these miraculous manifestations to the foundational apostles goes beyond the clear expression of the text itself as well as beyond the actual history of the early Christian communities.

A grammatical clue from verse four contributes to this line of thinking. Hebrews 2:4 reads, "God also bore witness," by miraculous manifestations. In the English Standard Version, "bore witness" is translated in the past tense. However, "bore witness" is translated from a Greek present active participle, which can imply continuous action. A past tense English translation of the participle isn't inaccurate, but at the very least, continuous action is implied by the verbal form. In other words, Hebrews 2:3-4 in no way limits the ongoing distribution of the Spirit's gifts in the lives of believers.

First Corinthians 13:8-12

This passage clearly says that prophecies and tongues will "pass away" and "cease" (respectively). Paul is extolling the superior virtue of love to the Corinthian believers, and in doing so he instructs us that when "the perfect comes, the partial will pass away." Some cessationists seize upon this text as a final nail in the coffin of the continuationist view of the gifts of the Spirit.

Cessationists argue that the "perfect" to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 13:10 is *either* the text of the New Testament itself or the maturity of the Christian community. The idea is that once we have the Scripture, we no longer need the gifts. Going far beyond the intentions of the apostle Paul, it is sometimes argued that when the church "grows up," there is no longer any need for the kinds of Spirit manifestations that were going on in Corinth. But, upon closer examination, this interpretation completely disintegrates.

Paul's reference to "the perfect" here is neither a reference to the New Testament canon nor to the more mature Christian

community. Most scholars (even some cessationist ones) understand the “perfect” here to be a reference to the final consummation when believers will no longer see through a glass darkly—a reality that will only be in full effect at the Second Coming of Christ. So, the most these verses could say would be that we won’t need tongues and prophecy in heaven—but we will still have love. This is confirmed in verse 12 where it is made explicit that the time when the spiritual gifts will cease will be the time when we see Christ face to face.

The Gospel and the Gifts

At this point, several caveats would be helpful for those who believe in the continuity of the Spirit’s giftings. First, we should beware allowing the gifts to become sources of spiritual pride. From a biblical perspective, the fruits are way more important than the gifts in determining our level of maturity. Fruit without gifts may be powerless, but gifts without fruit are pointless—they miss their God-directed purpose.

Second, we should be aware that while we can affirm that the Holy Spirit still speaks to and through us today, we must always distinguish between contemporary words from God and the written Word of God. The Bible is the changeless, timeless revelation of God’s truth. Any contemporary revelation must align with and be subject to the authority of Scripture.

Likewise, though the gift of apostleship continues in the life of the church today, the original apostles played a unique role in the foundation of the church. Because of their foundational role in the drama of redemption, their words have unique authority and importance for the general church. A simple way of thinking of this point is to remember that whatever God says today will always align with what He has said yesterday (in the Word). Humans are fallible and transient, but the Word of God will stand forever.

Finally, the gifts of the Spirit must never distract us from the central message of the gospel itself. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is telling in this regard. After an in-depth discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14, the apostle focuses his readers back to the gospel, which he said was, “of first importance,” (1 Cor. 15:3). In other words, the gifts are important,

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even necessary in the life of the church, but they can never be the central point of focus. When the gifts become the goal, the church is unhealthy.

In an unexpected way, how Paul deals with the unruly, chaotic, worldly church at Corinth provides a strong argument for the continuation of the Spirit’s giftings in the church. With all the disorder happening in Corinth, we might expect Paul completely to disavow the operation of the giftings in the church. Yet even though Paul corrects the ungodly views and behaviors of the Corinthian believers (idolatry, factionalism, disunity, sexual immorality, disorderly worship, arrogance, spiritual pride, etc.), he doesn’t even come close to stopping their exercise of the gifts of the Spirit in worship.

Instead, rather than shut down the move of the Spirit in Corinth, Paul encourages them (and by extension us) to earnestly desire the gifts (1 Cor. 12:31; 14:1, 12, 39). He expresses his wish that everyone would speak in tongues and prophesy (1 Cor. 14:5). These admonitions would be strange and confusing if the biblical message meant to curtail the gifts altogether.

For Paul and the other New Testament writers, the gifts and the gospel went hand in hand. Of course, Paul’s understanding of the gospel is a much grander vision than we typically hear in the church today. The old terminology for this, “full gospel,” might be a bit off-putting. However, there is profound truth to the reality that the

gospel is not just about justification of sinners by faith. That is an indispensable part of it. But, Jesus declared a gospel of the kingdom.

Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel had not only to do with the salvation of individual sinners but also with His Lordship and His invasion of the realms of darkness with the light of His truth. The gifts and the reality of the life of the Spirit are merely reflections of the future life of the kingdom of God manifest in the present. Spiritual gifts that may seem out of the ordinary for us reflect the fundamental reality of the new creation. This is the overwhelming testimony of the early church, the New Testament documents and church history.

Gifts for Kingdom Building Today

The most straightforward, honest reading of the New Testament depicts a church that is effervescent with the gifts and operation of the Spirit. If the miraculous gifts were to have ended with the apostles, we could trust that God would have made that clear in the biblical revelation. With Paul, let me encourage you to eagerly desire the gifts. Eagerly pursue the Spirit. Earnestly seek God for His empowering presence, and breathe deeply the future air of the consummate kingdom of God, the fullness of the gospel, in this present age. ◀

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