

The Issues in Charismatic Theology

Cessationism vs. Continuationism

Gerry Andersen

Valley Bible Church, Lancaster, California

www.valleybible.net

1. Introduction

The belief that all the spiritual gifts of the New Testament are presently functioning as they did with the founding of the church is the principal distinction of the Charismatic Movement. In particular, the spiritual gifts that are prophetic or that are the miraculous evidence of such prophecy are thought to be continuing to function, hence the term “continuationism.”

The alternative is the view that such spiritual gifts, known as “sign gifts” ceased with the establishment of the church with the passing of the apostles and corresponding completion of the New Testament. The term for this view is “cessationism.” This sign gifts are either revelatory, such as knowledge or prophecy, or miraculous in support of such revelation, such as miracles, tongues, interpretation of tongues, healing, etc.

There are also a large number of people who are non-Charismatic in their theology but who are unsure about this issue. This is partially due to the great confusion caused by Charismatic teaching regarding the biblical miracles, partially due to the failure to teach well on the subject by most pastors, and partially due to the societal influence of tolerance and thus a reluctance to conclude that the Charismatic Movement is wrong concerning the subject of spiritual gifts.

2. The case for continuationism

a. The argument from silence

Continuationists will argue there is no Bible text that directly teaches that certain spiritual gifts will end during the church age so therefore they must continue. This thinking views the words of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 regarding the end of prophecy, knowledge and tongues as looking to the return of Christ. This argument depends upon the interpretation of that text.

b. The nature of the gifts

There is an opposition to dividing spiritual gifts into those lasting and those limited to the apostolic age. This is considered to be an artificial distinction. Yet most Charismatics view that the apostles were functioning in a different capacity than anyone today so the idea of certain men functioning in a unique role in the church age is accepted by most.

c. A large number of people believe all the gifts of the Spirit function today

Can so many million people be wrong? Can my church/pastor/parents/etc be wrong? The simple answer is of course they can be wrong. Cults can have millions of followers. Most of Judea were not followers of Jesus. Numbers do not determine truth.

d. Anecdotal evidence

A common reply to the idea that the sign gifts have ceased is based upon experience. The perception that the sign gifts continue to function is based upon a belief that they actually occur. These are typically experiences that they have heard about, such as claims of miracles that someone they know has told them about. The validity of these claims are dubious at best when compared to the biblical evidence of supernatural activity. We will look into this with our next class on miracles but present day claims lack both the confidence in the reports and the types of convincing miracles.

e. Spiritual gifts are for the edification of the church

This line of reasoning concludes that the sign gifts must be continuing today because gifts were given for the purpose of edifying the church. Yet it overlooks *how* these gifts serve to edify the church. We indeed have the complete prophecy of the New Testament Scripture because of the giftedness of the writers. The supernatural deeds validated their message.

f. New Testament prophecy is not the same as the Scripture

This argument has come about in recent decades to counter the criticism that existing prophecy results in the Scripture being incomplete. Under this view, prophecy in the church age did not have either the authority or the accuracy of Old Testament prophecy.

Leading Charismatic theologian Wayne Grudem explains this as, "...prophecy in New Testaments churches did *not* have the authority of Scripture. It was not spoken in words that were the very words of God, but rather in merely human words. And because it has this lesser authority, there is no reason to think that it will not continue in the church until Christ returns." Yet Peter identifies New Testament prophecy as Scripture (2 Peter 1:19-21). Grudem's view only serves to give these false prophets an excuse to be wrong.

g. The difficulty of self-deception

One's own practice of alleged tongues speaking or some encounter with an event can be very hard for a person to repudiate. This experiential evidence trumps the Scripture because we can become convinced in our own understanding. This argument is at the core of Charismatic's belief system and is difficult to overcome.

3. The case for cessationism

Before we state the reasons why cessationism corresponds with biblical teaching, we must first understand it. It refers to the ceasing of specific gifts that were associated with special revelation from God which was completed in the New Testament.

It does not mean that God no longer does miraculous activity. Most notably, God intercedes in the lives of those who come to saving faith in a completely supernatural way. With man this is impossible (Matthew 19:26).

Furthermore, this does not mean that God cannot act in miraculous ways in the lives of people today. God can choose to do what He wills. We can pray for God to do His supernatural work. God is fully able to bless people in healing their body and when this occurs, it is a different type of work of God than the gift of healing exercised supernaturally by a person. Miraculous healing through someone with this spiritual gift was for the primary purpose of the divine validation of their ministry.

a. 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 specifically teaches that prophecy, tongues and knowledge will cease to exist. There are two basic views as to the timing of the end of prophecy, either prophecy will be done away at the second coming of Christ or prophecy will be done away with at the end of the apostolic age and completion of the New Testament.

1) The significance of the gifts being done away (1 Corinthians 13:8)

Why does 1 Corinthians 13:8 only include gifts associated with God's revelation? All gifts will end with the return of Christ, so what would be the point of noting that these gifts in particular end with Christ? The gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 13:8 are the gifts of God's revelation and they are set apart as passing away because God's revelation to man has ended with the close of the New Testament and the passing of the apostles. It makes much more sense to describe them as ending with the close of the New Testament which sets them apart from non-revelatory gifts.

2) The meaning of the term "perfect" (1 Corinthians 13:10)

Both interpretations regarding the timing of the cessation of tongues rest on the understanding of the word "perfect" in 1 Corinthians 13:10. The issue is whether "perfect" is quantitative or qualitative. That is, whether "perfect" means a completing of what was incomplete, or whether "perfect" means a perfecting of what was imperfect. The word for "perfect" (*TELEIOS*) in 1 Corinthians 13:10 has a well-established meaning of "complete." Also, Paul never uses *TELEIOS* to mean absolute perfection, which occurs at the return of Christ. He uses this same term in this same book to mean mature believers (1 Corinthians 2:6) and to mean mature in thinking (1 Corinthians 14:20). The completion of the God's revelation fits Paul's usage of *TELEIOS* much better.

Understanding *TELEIOS* in 1 Corinthians 13:10 as “complete” is better than “perfect” because of the contrast with “partial.” The completed Scripture is the reason why the partial, or incomplete, prophecy and knowledge are done away, for they are no longer necessary. This is better than trying to contrast the perfection of Christ’s return with the imperfection of prophecy and knowledge. Prophecy and divine revelation (knowledge) is not imperfect, but is rather incomplete. This then consistently views both “in part” and “perfect” as quantitative, rather than “in part” as quantitative and “perfect” as qualitative.

In other words, since prophecy is not partly perfect, but is rather a perfect part of a whole, it makes more sense to understand “perfect” as “complete.” We know in part before the completion of the New Testament (1 Corinthians 13:9) and with the completion of the canon the partial revelation of prophecy will be done away (1 Corinthians 13:10).

3) The maturing revelation of God (1 Corinthians 13:11)

Also, 1 Corinthians 13:11 describes a development from childhood to maturity, which is not instantaneous but gradual. This analogy of maturity does not fit the sudden return of Christ. It rather fits the gradual reduction of prophecy as the New Testament was being written and as the apostles and prophets passed on.

4) The meaning of “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12)

1 Corinthians 13:12 is why most interpret this passage as referring to the return of Christ. Phrases like “face to face” and “knowing fully” can make people jump to this conclusion. However the better explanation is to view 1 Corinthians 13:12 as teaching that with the completion of the biblical revelation, we will know ourselves fully, as we are fully known. The metaphor of the mirror (*ESOPRON*) is used only in one other place in the New Testament, in James 1:23, where it refers to God’s revelation in the Bible, where we look at ourselves in a mirror, not at God.

Also, when the phrase “face to face” is used about God and man in the Bible, it means God’s revelation to man, not God’s fellowship with man. No one has seen God at any time (John 1:18) and the use of the term “face to face” in relation to God in the Bible refers to God’s communication to man (Genesis 32:30, Exodus 33:11, Numbers 14:14, Deuteronomy 5:4, 34:10). God’s complete revelation enables us to see ourselves as in a mirror face to face, completely, rather than as in a mirror dimly, partially. With God’s full revelation, we are able to understand God’s view of us in a way not possible before.

However, even if 1 Corinthians 13:12 is speaking about the return of Christ it does not undermine the view that the sign gifts will end with the completion of God’s revelation with the apostolic age. The partial being done away does not need to mean that we then know fully (1 Corinthians 13:12). This final knowledge could be a separate occasion at the coming of Christ with 1 Corinthians 13:11 describing the increasing completeness of God’s revelation and 13:12 describing the absolute completeness at the return of Christ.

5) That which endures throughout the church age

Finally, this view explains the contrast of 1 Corinthians 13:13. In contrast to the three gifts that this passage states will not endure throughout the church age (prophecy, tongues and knowledge) are the three virtues which will endure throughout the age (faith, hope and love). This temporal understanding of the virtues is further affirmed when we learn that love is the greatest, in that it alone is permanent while faith and hope will be fulfilled when we are at home with the Lord (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:6-8; Romans 8:24-25). Thus the distinction between faith and hope and the gifts of 13:8 lead to the conclusion that the sign gifts end before the return of Christ, not at the return of Christ, when hope and faith are fulfilled.

b. The sign gifts accompanied the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20)

The church was founded upon the apostles and the prophets based upon Ephesians 2:20, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, *having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone.” When the church was founded, the role of apostles and prophets (Ephesians 4:11) was completed with the revelation of God in the New Testament. This is why there are no longer apostles and prophets.

c. History testifies to the end of the sign gifts

As we read the New Testament, the period of miraculous activity occurred through Christ and His followers and diminished as the New Testament was being completed. The Book of Acts shows the miraculous events reducing in frequency as the book develops. This corresponds to the reference to sign gifts in the epistles, where the earlier epistles include them and the later ones do not.

By the time of the writing of Hebrews (67-68 AD) the author could refer to these followers of Jesus as confirming “After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.” This validation of what was spoken occurred in the past. As the Scripture was completed, accompanying miracles decreased accordingly.

After the first century church leaders who referred to the supernatural gifts viewed them as having ended in the first century. Men such as Luther, Calvin, and earlier Augustine and Chrysostom are such examples. This testimony of church history is remarkable in the absence of anything like what has been claimed over the past 120 years of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement. The few times we find people making claims of miracles or tongues speaking, they were heretical, such as the Montanists in the late second century.

This era where certain men were empowered to perform miraculous deeds corresponds to what we find in the Old Testament as well. There were eras of God's revelation and miracles, the first with Moses and the first books of the Old Testament and the second with Elijah and Elisha during the time of the ministry of the prophets. These periods were fairly similar in duration to what we find with Jesus and the apostles.

d. The completion of Scripture

The New Testament was completed with the Book of Revelation by John near the close of the first century, concluding the prophetic ministry of the church. This extended beyond the gift of prophecy to all the various attesting miracles that authenticate the messenger of God. The purpose of these signs were to validate the messenger and his message (Acts 2:22; Romans 15:18-19; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Hebrews 2:4).

e. The nature of miracles

The purpose of miracles is to testify that God indeed sent His messenger. Jesus said in John 5:36, "the very works that I do testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me." Also in John 10:24, "the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me." This is also true for the apostles. "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles" (2 Corinthians 12:12). In order for works to testify of God's messenger, they need to be significantly compelling.

The nature of convincing signs is the intuitive problem with the claims for miracles in the modern era. They are highly dubious due to the types of claims and the practice of falsification. Even without comparing these claims to the biblical miracles, they are highly questionable. This same can be said about alleged tongue speaking. Our next class will look more into the subject of miracles.

4. Conclusion

If the church no longer has functioning sign gifts then Charismatic Theology is completely gutted. The conclusion of this matter determines whether we should worship God in a Charismatic church or not. If God continues to work through these sign gifts in the lives of His people, then any church without these gifts is deficient. Moreover, churches that do not support these gifts are opposing the very work of the Holy Spirit.

However, if God's work through these sign gifts ceased with the completion of the New Testament, then what is being claimed by Charismatics is fraudulent. People are being led to believe and practice things that are worse than meaningless, it greatly confuses the true works of God in the Scripture by equivocating them with what they do. Even worse than the misrepresentation of man's works as God's works is the misrepresentation of man's words as coming from God. As such, people are deceived into believing what is not true. Therefore, the issue of Cessationism is no small theological nuance but has great implications for our spiritual lives.