



Why I Am a Cessationist

by DAVID GUNN

Numerous controversies have gripped the fundamentalist and evangelical worlds in the last century. Debates have raged over a whole panoply of issues: the inerrancy of Scripture, the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the extent of God's foreknowledge, the nature of justification in Pauline theology, the place of repentance in salvation, and the list goes on.

Among the most consequential of these controversies we must surely list the debate over the continuation of spectacular spiritual gifts. Since early in the twentieth century, Christians have disagreed passionately on this issue, and their theological conclusions on this point have led to markedly divergent ways of "doing church." This is a serious issue which deserves our careful attention.

Unfortunately, in some cessationist circles this issue is too often avoided or downplayed. Even worse, it is sometimes oversimplified to such a degree that our position on spiritual gifts is reduced to a quick and easy exercise in proof texting, as though it were sufficient merely to gesture toward 1 Corinthians 13:8–10 and then call it a day. This kind of oversimplified approach will never do.

Because the issue is a complicated one, multiple lines of inquiry must be examined to settle the question whether all the spiritual gifts continue to operate today. Unlike the inspiration of Scripture or the deity of Christ, there is no single "silver bullet"

proof text that can simply and decisively settle the issue. So a broad-spectrum argument, or series of arguments, is called for.

My burden in this article is to lay out such a broad-spectrum argument. I don't claim that this is the only valid approach to establishing a cessationist perspective, or even that it is the best one. But I have found it persuasive, and I hope you will as well.

Definition of Terms

Broadly speaking, the two camps involved in this debate are the *continuationists* and the *cessationists*. *Continuationism* holds that all spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament do and should continue to be operative today. Thus phenomena such as speaking in tongues, miraculous healing, and prophecy are practices in Christian ministry. Continuationism has historically been embraced and defended by the Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Signs and Wonders movements, and in recent days has also found a home in neo-Calvinistic and New Apostolic Reformation circles.

Cessationism, on the other hand, holds that some of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament (specifically the sign and revelatory gifts) were intended to function only during the Apostolic Era, and thus have ceased to be operative. Note that cessationists do not believe that *miracles* have ceased—God is still free to work miracles anytime He chooses. Nor do we believe that certain gifts ceased *arbitrarily*—rather, each gift was given for a particular purpose. Those gifts with a broad ministry purpose (serving, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership, mercy, faith,

evangelism) continue to operate today just as they always have. But those gifts that were intended to fulfill a sign function (healing, miracles) or a revelatory function (prophecy, tongues) have ceased because their purposes have already been fulfilled. Now that the church has reached a stage of maturity and has access to the completed canon of Scripture, sign and revelatory gifts are no longer necessary, so they have ceased to operate. This cessation did not come about by accident or because of apostasy or spiritual laziness, but in accordance with God's sovereign plan for His church's development and operation.

Historical and Theological Issues

To frame the issue properly, I begin with several historical and theological issues that strongly support the cessationist perspective. They do not clinch the matter in a surefire, unassailable fashion, but they are instructive and supportive of cessationism.

Biblical Norms and Miracles/Revelation

Oftentimes our conclusions are driven by our presuppositions, which are in turn informed by our expectations. For many continuationists there seems to be an expectation that we should be seeing visible, dramatic manifestations of God's power. After all, don't we read constantly of God's spectacular miraculous and revelatory interventions throughout Biblical history? And that being the case, shouldn't we expect to see the same kinds of phenomena in our day? After all, God does not change (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17). So we should expect to see a miracle-working God working miracles! And since the church is the institution through which God is principally working in the world today, it stands to reason that we should see God's miracle-working and revelatory power operative in and through the church.

The flaw in this line of reasoning is that actually God *wasn't* constantly working miracles and imparting special revelation throughout Biblical history. To the contrary, miraculous and revelatory phenomena have been extremely rare throughout history—including the periods of history recorded in the Bible. The average patriarch, Israelite, or member of the early church would go his entire life without ever witnessing a single miracle or receiving so much as a whisper of special revelation from God.

Instead, we find that miracles tended to come in isolated clusters, especially during a few pivotal moments in Biblical history. In Moses' day the Lord unleashed numerous spectacular displays of divine power. Several hundred years later, during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, the same condition obtained. And finally in the first century, through the ministries of Jesus and the apostles, miraculous activity again reached a crescendo. But outside these three exceptional periods of Biblical history, miracles were exceedingly rare and extraordinary.

The same is true of special revelation. Biblical history covers a period of multiple thousands of years: from Abraham to the end of the Apostolic Era is a good 2,200 years, to say nothing of the centuries or millennia crammed into Genesis 1—11. Yet in all that time, the Lord saw fit to inspire only 66 books of written

revelation. Other forms of special revelation (dreams, visions, the Urim and Thummim, etc.) were equally rare.

This point is not in and of itself sufficient to establish cessationism, but it does suggest that we shouldn't necessarily expect to see new miracles and revelations in our day. In fact, Biblical precedent should orient our expectations in the opposite direction.

Historical Norms and Sign/Revelatory Gifts

Second, we should ask, Did the sign and revelatory gifts in fact cease shortly after the Apostolic Era? There is good evidence to suggest that they did.

The first piece of evidence comes from a heresy called Montanism that arose in the middle of the second century. Montanus and his followers decried that prophetic revelation had apparently ceased, so they sought to restore this function to the church. (Perhaps "make prophecy great again" is a good way of summing up their intentions!) The Montanists would routinely enter ecstatic trances when they prophesied, possibly utilizing ecstatic unintelligible speech. Eusebius's description of this phenomenon is interesting:

And he [Montanus] became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things, prophesying in a manner contrary to the constant custom of the Church handed down by tradition from the beginning.

Before too long, Montanism was condemned as a heresy, and its adherents were excommunicated. This bizarre episode from early church history is instructive for two reasons: First, it suggests that at least one of the revelatory gifts had in fact ceased (otherwise, why the impetus among the Montanists to restore it?). And second, it indicates that the early church tended to reject this kind of restorationist movement.

The second and third pieces of evidence come from John Chrysostom and Augustine, arguably the two most influential church fathers in the fourth and fifth centuries. These two titans of the ancient church—Chrysostom in the East and Augustine in the West—would have been in the best possible positions to report on the condition and standard practices of the churches in their day, as widely read and enormously influential as they were.

Referring to 1 Corinthians 12—14, Chrysostom wrote,

This whole place 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. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity hath produced us again another question: namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more?

Similarly, in his commentary on 1 John, Augustine wrote, 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 shew 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.

This line of inquiry does not necessarily answer whether or not the sign and revelatory gifts *should have* ceased. But it does strongly suggest that they *did* in fact cease.

Today's Charismatic Phenomena and Biblical Depictions

Third, I would respectfully suggest that the ostensible charismatic phenomena in continuationist circles today do *not* correspond to the depictions of the genuine phenomena in the New Testament. This suggests that although continuationist Christians may be deeply sincere and well-intentioned in their attempts to use these spiritual gifts, they are not truly doing so.

Take the gift of healing. When Christ and the apostles healed the sick, it was dramatic, unambiguous, and usually instantaneous. The blind received sight. The formerly lame were “walking, leaping, and praising God” (Acts 3:8). In some cases even the dead were raised. By contrast, the kind of healing that takes place in continuationist circles today is unreliable and oftentimes ambiguous. In some cases, especially where certain high-profile faith healers are involved, fraud may even be involved. This is a far cry from Christ's miraculous healings, which were so effective and unquestionably authentic that Jesus could offer them as unassailable proof of His own divine origin (John 10:38).

The gift of prophecy has also fallen on hard times. Alleged prophecies in continuationist circles today are typically so vague as to be unverifiable or specific but fallible. Not infrequently they can be charged with contradicting Scriptural doctrine. In other words, the prophets of our day routinely fail to meet the test for legitimate prophecy given in Deuteronomy 18:18–22, according to which, prophecies would have to be specific enough to be verifiable or falsifiable, and prophecies that did not come to pass were unequivocally judged to be false prophecies uttered by false prophets.

(Continuationists are, of course, aware of the discrepancy. That is why some of their finest scholars, most notably Wayne Grudem and Sam Storms, have argued that whereas Old Testament prophecy was *infallible*, New Testament prophecy is *fallible*. It's a novel solution to the problem, if a bit ad hoc. In my opinion, the arguments advanced by Grudem and Storms are not convincing and depend upon rather strained exegesis of the germane passages.)

Speaking in tongues is a slightly trickier case to adjudicate because of the interpretive complexities involved. Exegetes continue to debate whether the tongues referred to in 1 Corinthians are the same as the tongues in Acts 2. Some have argued that whereas the gift of tongues in Acts 2 involved unlearned earthly languages, the gift in 1 Corinthians involved ecstatic unintelligible speech (the kind of tongues-speaking, or glossolalia, that occurs in continuationist churches today).

I think this argument is unpersuasive for at least two reasons. First, since Acts 2 contains the only detailed depiction of the gift of tongues in operation, we should take that passage as paradigmatic. And since there is nothing in the 1 Corinthians passages that demands those tongues be understood as ecstatic

unintelligible speech, the most natural and straightforward interpretive approach is to see the two passages as describing the same phenomenon. In that case, both passages describe not ecstatic unintelligible speech, but rather the divine enabling to speak in an unlearned earthly language (this is quite clear in Acts 2:7–11). Second, ecstatic unintelligible speech has been widely practiced in various pagan religions—including first-century Graeco-Roman pagan religions! (For documentation on this point, see chapter 8 of Thomas Edgar's book *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit*.) That being the case, it seems highly unlikely that the Spirit would have used ecstatic unintelligible speech as a sign gift to certify the gospel message.

If this is true—if the New Testament gift of tongues involved unlearned earthly languages and not ecstatic unintelligible speech—then we must conclude that continuationist churches have failed to reproduce this spiritual gift too.

This discussion of the historical and theological issues has endeavored to show, first, that we should not expect miraculous and revelatory phenomena to be frequent; second, that the sign and revelatory gifts did in fact cease shortly after the close of the Apostolic Era; and third, that the sign and revelatory gifts as they are ostensibly being manifested in continuationist churches today do not actually correspond to the Biblical depictions of those gifts as they were practiced in the first century. These three points incline me very strongly toward the cessationist camp. We now turn to a brief survey of some pertinent New Testament passages that further support the cessationist viewpoint.

New Testament Passages

2 Corinthians 12:12 and Ephesians 2:19–21

While defending his apostolic ministry against his detractors, Paul appealed to the mighty wonders he had performed among the Corinthian Christians (2 Cor. 12:12). In this passage, he equates “signs and wonders and mighty deeds” with “the signs of an apostle.” The implication is that these types of miraculous displays had a special function in certifying the authenticity of the apostles' message.

Furthermore, Ephesians 2:19–21 indicates that the prophets and apostles are the *foundation* of the church. This implies that once the foundational phase of the church had passed, the Apostolic office and prophetic ministry would no longer be needed.

1 Corinthians 13:8–12

Much ink has been spilled concerning the proper interpretation of this passage, and space fails us to address the matter comprehensively here. Suffice it to say that, whatever one's interpretation is of the “perfect” (*teleion*) in verse 10, the sign and revelatory gifts are clearly portrayed as transitory and temporary in nature (they will “cease,” “vanish away,” and “be done away”). I think a good case can be made, based on Paul's analogy in verse 11, that this cessation would occur once the church had reached a certain level of maturity.

Hebrews 2:3–4

In this passage, the writer of Hebrews delineates three distinct groups who preached and/or heard the message about Jesus: first, the Lord Himself; second, those who heard the Lord (i.e., the first generation of Christians, the Apostolic generation); and third, those who heard the second group (i.e., the second generation of Christians). He then states that God used signs and wonders to confirm the message of the second group (the Apostolic generation). It seems legitimate to infer from this passage that the confirmatory use of signs and wonders may well have been restricted to the Apostolic generation and not intended to extend beyond it.

Synthesis

Taken together, these passages suggest that God gave spectacular sign and revelatory functions to the church for use during the Apostolic Era (the period of the church's infancy or immaturity). This was to authenticate the message of the Apostolic generation and set apart true apostles and their collaborators from the imposters. If this is correct, it implies that in the post-Apostolic Era (the period of the church's maturation), these functions would no longer be necessary.

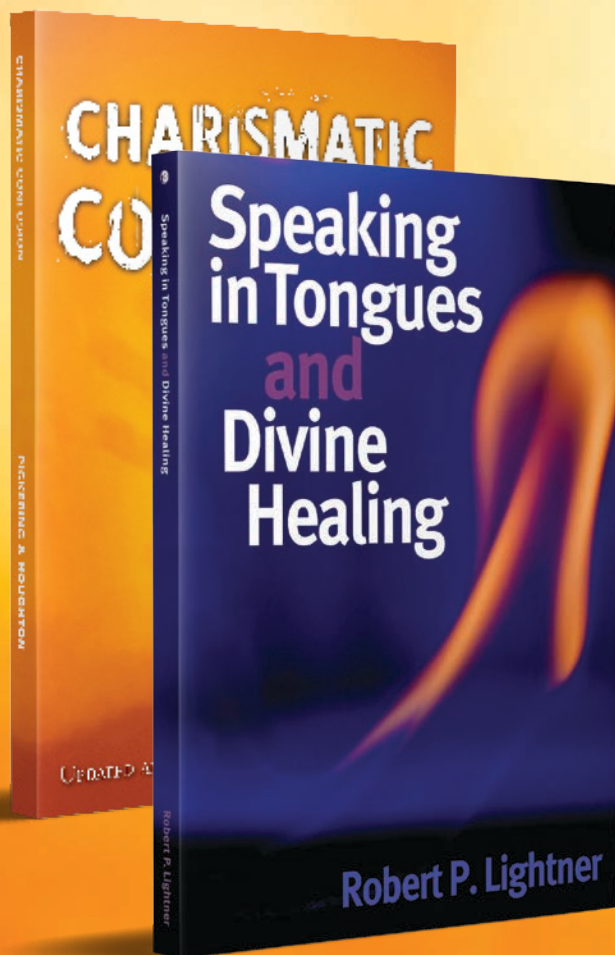
Conclusion

The debate over the continuation of spiritual gifts is admittedly complex; and there are godly, Bible-loving Christians on

both sides of the issue. For the reasons outlined above, I find myself strongly inclined toward the cessationist perspective. I think it makes the most sense of the historical and theological issues, and it is well supported by the New Testament data.

But now, having examined the *rationale* for cessationism, I would like to close with a few words on the *significance* of this discussion. At the end of the day this isn't merely a methodological disagreement, as though we were simply quibbling over how church services should be carried out; rather, it concerns the far more momentous issue of religious authority. Where shall we go to hear a word from the Lord, to settle doctrinal questions, and to learn what God requires of us? I think the Reformers were right on this point: *Sola scriptura!*—Scripture alone is our sufficient and final source of religious authority. What need have we of fallible prophetic utterances or ambiguous signs and wonders when the completed canon of God's holy Word is readily available to be consulted? Let us stand on the sufficiency of Scripture and seek no other sources of revelation or attestation to what God has done in Christ. The apostle Peter regarded God's written Word as far more certain than even the experience of witnessing the Transfiguration firsthand (1 Pet. 1:19)! May we regard it with same reverence, confidence, and trust. **B**

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