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Bridgeway Church / Foundations
The Holy Spirit (4)

The Holy Spirit: Who is He and How do I Experience Him?
Part Four

**Continuationism vs. Cessationism;
Are the Miraculous Gifts of the Holy Spirit for Today?**

In order to bring this massive subject down to manageable proportions, I'm going to answer the question by giving you what I believe are twelve bad reasons for being a cessationist, followed by twelve good reasons for being a continuationist. But perhaps I should begin by defining those terms. A *cessationist* is not a person who believes the South had a right to secede from the Union in the middle of the 19th century! That would be a *secessionist*. A *cessationist* is someone who believes that certain spiritual gifts, typically those of a more overtly supernatural nature, *ceased* to be given by God to the church sometime late in the first century a.d. A *continuationist* 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.

Twelve Bad Reasons for being a Cessationist

(1) The first bad reason for being a cessationist is an appeal to 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 on the assumption that the "perfect" is something other or less than the fullness of the eternal state ushered in at the second coming of Jesus Christ. Even most Cessationists now agree that the "perfect" cannot be a reference to the canon of Scripture or the alleged maturity of the church in the first century. The "perfect" is that glorious state of final consummation when, as Paul says, we will see "face to face" and "know fully" (v. 12), as over against the limitations imposed by our life now where we see as "in a mirror dimly" and know only "in part" (v. 12).

There is simply no evidence that even Paul anticipated the formation of a "canon" of Scripture following the death of the apostles. In fact, Paul seems to have expected that he himself might survive until the coming of the Lord (1 Thess. 4:15-16; 1 Cor. 15:51). Furthermore, there is no reason to think that Paul could have expected the Corinthians to figure out that he meant the "canon" when he used the term to *teleion*. "In any case," notes Max Turner, "the completed canon of Scripture would hardly signify for the Corinthians the *passing away of merely 'partial' knowledge* (and prophecy and tongues with it), and the arrival of 'full knowledge', for the Corinthians already had the Old Testament, the gospel tradition (presumably), and (almost certainly) more Pauline teaching than finally got into the canon."¹

We must also take note of v. 12b where Paul says that with the coming of the "perfect" our "partial knowledge" will give way to a depth of knowledge that is only matched by the way we are known by God. That is to say, when the perfect comes we will then see "face to face" and will know even as we are now known by God. Few people any longer dispute that this is language descriptive of our experience in the eternal state, subsequent to the return of Christ. As Turner says, "however much we respect the New Testament canon, Paul can only be accused of the wildest exaggeration in verse 12 if that is what he was talking about."² Finally, this view rests on the assumption that prophecy was a form of divine revelation designed to serve the church in the interim, until such time as the canon was formed. But a careful examination of the NT reveals that prophecy had a much broader purpose that would not in the least be affected by the completion of the canon.

(2) Another bad or illegitimate reason for being a Cessationist is the belief that signs and wonders as well as certain spiritual gifts served only to confirm or authenticate the original company of apostles and that when the apostles passed away so also did the gifts. The fact is, no biblical text (not even Heb. 2:4) ever says that signs and wonders or spiritual gifts of a particular sort authenticated the apostles. Signs and wonders authenticated Jesus and the apostolic message about him. If signs and wonders were designed exclusively to authenticate apostles, we have no explanation why non-apostolic believers (such as Philip and Stephen) were empowered to perform them.

¹ Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts, Then and Now* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 294.

² *Ibid.*, 295.

Therefore, this is a good reason for being a cessationist only if you can demonstrate that authentication or attestation of the apostolic message was the *sole and exclusive purpose* of such displays of divine power. However, *nowhere in the NT is the purpose or function of the miraculous or the charismata reduced to that of attestation*. The miraculous, in whatever form in which it appeared, served several other distinct purposes: *doxological* (to glorify God - John 11:4; 11:40; John 2:11; 9:3; and Matt. 15:29-31); *evangelistic* (to prepare the way for the gospel to be made known - see Acts 9:32-43); *pastoral* (as an expression of compassion and love and care for the sheep - Matt. 14:14; Mark 1:40-41); and *edification* (to build up and strengthen believers - 1 Cor. 12:7 and “common good”; 1 Cor. 14:3, 4, 5, 26).

My point is this: *all* the gifts of the Spirit, whether tongues or teaching, whether prophecy or mercy, whether healing or helps, were given, among other reasons, for the edification and building up and encouraging and instructing and consoling and sanctifying of the body of Christ. Therefore, even if the ministry of the miraculous gifts to attest and authenticate has ceased, a point I concede only for the sake of argument, such gifts would continue to function in the church for the other reasons cited.

Someone might object to this by saying: But weren't miraculous gifts “signs of an apostle” such that when apostleship ceased, so too did the signs? No, in fact 2 Corinthians 12:12 says no such thing. Paul does *not* say the insignia or marks of an apostle *are* signs, wonders and miracles. Rather, as the NASB more accurately translates, he asserts that “the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, *by* [or better still, *accompanied by*] signs and wonders and miracles.” Paul's point is that miraculous phenomena accompanied his ministry in Corinth. Signs, wonders and miracles were attendant elements in his apostolic work. But they were not themselves the “signs of an apostle.”

(3) A third bad reason for being a cessationist is the belief that since we now have the completed canon of Scripture we no longer need the operation of so-called miraculous gifts. However, the Bible itself quite simply never says this. In fact, as will become evident below, it says precisely the opposite. It is the Bible itself that gives us warrant for believing that all spiritual gifts are designed by God for the church in the present age.

No biblical author ever claims that written Scripture has replaced or in some sense supplanted the need for signs, wonders and the like. Why would the presence of the completed canon preclude the need for miraculous phenomena? If signs, wonders and the power of the Holy Spirit were essential in bearing witness to the truth of the gospel *then*, why not *now*? In other words, it seems reasonable to assume that the miracles which confirmed the gospel in the first century, wherever it was preached, would serve no less to confirm the gospel in subsequent centuries, even our own.

If signs, wonders and miracles were essential in the physical presence of the Son of God, how much more so now in his absence. Surely we are not prepared to suggest that the Bible, for all its glory, is sufficient to do what Jesus couldn't. Jesus thought it necessary to utilize the miraculous phenomena of the Holy Spirit to attest and confirm his ministry. If it was essential for him, how much more so for us? In other words, if the glorious presence of the Son of God himself did not preclude the need for miraculous phenomena, how can we suggest that our possession of the Bible does?

(4) A fourth bad reason for being a cessationist is the belief that to embrace the validity of all spiritual gifts today requires that one embrace classical Pentecostalism and its belief in Spirit-baptism as separate from and subsequent to conversion, as well as their doctrine that speaking in tongues is the initial physical evidence of having experienced this Spirit-baptism. One can be a continuationist, as I am, and affirm that Spirit-baptism happens for all believers at the moment of their faith and conversion to Christ and affirm that speaking in tongues is a gift for some, but not all, believers.

(5) Another bad reason for being a cessationist is the idea that if one spiritual gift, such as apostleship, has ceased to be operative in the church that other, and perhaps all, miraculous gifts have ceased to be operative in the church. But is “apostleship” a spiritual gift? I doubt it. Even if it is, there is nothing inconsistent about acknowledging that one gift might have ceased while others continue. If you can make an exegetical case for the cessation of apostleship, fine. But then you must proceed and make an equally persuasive exegetical case for the cessation of other gifts. That is what I contend you cannot do. I'm more than happy to concede that *every* spiritual gift has ceased and is no longer operative, if you can provide me with biblical evidence to that effect. In the meantime, the mere potential for one or more gifts to have ceased is no argument that others definitely have.

(6) A sixth bad reason for being a cessationist is the fear that to acknowledge the validity today of revelatory gifts such as prophecy and word of knowledge would necessarily undermine the finality and sufficiency of Holy Scripture. But this argument is based on the false assumption that revelatory gifts such as prophecy and word of knowledge provide us with infallible truths that are equal in authority to the biblical text itself.

(7) A seventh bad reason for being a cessationist is the appeal to Ephesians 2:20 on the assumption that revelatory gifts such as *prophecy* were uniquely linked to the apostles and therefore designed to function only during the so-called *foundational* period in the early church.

A closer look at Scripture indicates that there are numerous instances where prophecy was not linked to the apostles and never functioned foundationally. Not everyone who ministered prophetically was apostolic! In other words, Eph. 2:20 clearly does not have in view all prophetic ministry. Consider, for example, Acts 2 (where men and women, young and old, from all walks of life are expected to prophesy in the New Covenant age); Acts 19 (the ministry of Agabus); Acts 21:9 (and the four daughters of Philip who prophesied); as well as 1 Cor. 12:7-10; 14:1,39 (in these two texts all believers are exhorted to earnestly desire to prophesy); 1 Cor. 14:26; Romans 12; and 1 Thess. 5:19ff.

In summary, both the nature of the prophetic gift as well as its widespread distribution among Christians clearly indicates that there was far more to this gift than simply the apostles laying the foundation of the church. Therefore, neither the passing of the apostles nor the movement of the church beyond its foundational years has any bearing whatsoever on the validity of prophecy today.

(8) An eighth bad reason for being a Cessationist is the argument that since we typically don't see today miracles or gifts equal in *quality or intensity* to those in the ministries of *Jesus* and the *apostles*, God doesn't intend for *any* miraculous gifts of a *lesser quality or intensity* to operate in the church among ordinary Christians (but see 1 Cor. 12-14; Rom. 12; 1 Thess. 5:19-22; James 5).

However, no one denies that Jesus and the apostles operated at a far superior level of the supernatural than others. But why should that be an argument against the validity of the spiritual gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12? If we are going to insist that the apostles set the standard by which we are to judge the validity of all spiritual gifts, such as those in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, then we might be forced to conclude that no spiritual gift of any sort is valid today, for who would claim to teach like Paul or evangelize like Paul. No one measures up to the apostles in any respect.

The most that we may conclude from our not seeing apostolic healing or apostolic miracles is that we are not seeing healing/miracles at the level and with the frequency that they occurred in the ministry of the apostles. It does not mean that God has withdrawn gifts of healing or the gift of working miracles from the church at large.

(9) A ninth bad reason for being a cessationist is the so-called "cluster" argument. According to this argument, miracles and supernatural phenomena were concentrated or "clustered" at specific times in biblical history and therefore should not be expected to appear as a regular or normal phenomenon in other periods of history. My first response is to direct you to Jack Deere's book, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*. Jack provides an extensive and detailed refutation of this argument. I only wish spaced allowed me to reproduce his findings here.

Also, this argument, even if true, only demonstrates that miracles, signs, and wonders were more prevalent in some seasons than at other times, but not that they were non-existent during other seasons or that we shouldn't pray for them today. One must also explain not only why miraculous phenomena were prevalent in these three periods (assuming they were) but also why they were, allegedly, infrequent or isolated in all other periods (see Pss. 74:9-11; 77:7-14; and Mark 6:5).

We must also not forget that there were no cessationists in the Old Testament! No one during the time of the old covenant appealed to the alleged "clustering" of supernatural phenomena as grounds for arguing that such had altogether ceased. And, of course, as I hinted at above, the cluster argument is simply unbiblical and false. Miracles, signs, and wonders occur consistently throughout the OT (as Deere demonstrates in his extensive survey of the OT; see especially Jer. 32:20 as well as the miraculous and supernatural activity during the Babylonian Captivity as recorded in the book of Daniel). Prophecy in particular was prevalent through most of the OT, being absent or comparatively less active only because of the idolatry of Israel.

(10) A tenth bad reason for being a cessationist is the appeal to the alleged absence of miraculous gifts in church history subsequent to the first century.

(11) Eleventh, it is a bad reason to be a cessationist because of the absence of good experiences with spiritual gifts and the often fanatical excess of certain TV evangelists and some of those involved in the Word of Faith or Prosperity Gospel movements (as well as the anti-intellectualism often found in those movements).

(12) Finally, a twelfth bad reason for being a cessationist is fear of what embracing continuationism might entail for your life personally and the well-being of your church corporately.

Twelve Good Reasons for Being a Continuationist

(1) This may sound strange, but the first good reason for being a continuationist is the twelve bad reasons for being a cessationist! In other words, there simply is no convincing biblical, theological, historical, or experiential argument that either in isolation or in conjunction with any other arguments gives reason to believe that what God did in the first century he will not do in the twenty-first.

(2) A second good reason for being a continuationist is the consistent, indeed pervasive, and altogether positive presence throughout the NT of all spiritual gifts.³ Beginning with Pentecost, and continuing throughout the book of Acts, whenever the Spirit is poured out on new believers they experience the manifestation of his charismata. There is nothing to indicate this phenomenon was restricted to them and then. Such appears to be both widespread and common in the NT church. Christians in Rome (Romans 12), Corinth (1 Corinthians 12-14), Samaria (Acts 8), Caesarea (Acts 10), Antioch (Acts 13), Ephesus (Acts 19; 1 Timothy 1), Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 5), and Galatia (Galatians 3) experience the miraculous and revelatory gifts. It is difficult to imagine how the NT authors could have said any more clearly than *this* what New Covenant Christianity is supposed to look like. In other words, the burden of proof rests with the cessationist. If certain gifts of a special class have ceased, the responsibility is his to prove it.

(3) A third good reason for being a continuationist is the extensive NT evidence of the operation of so-called miraculous gifts among Christians who are not apostles. In other words, numerous non-apostolic men and women, young and old, across the breadth of the Roman Empire consistently exercised these gifts of the Spirit (and Stephen and Philip ministered in the power of signs and wonders).

Others, aside from the apostles, who exercised miraculous gifts include (1) the 70 who were commissioned in Luke 10:9,19-20; (2) at least 108 people among the 120 who were gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost; (3) Stephen (Acts 6-7); (4) Phillip (Acts 8); (5) Ananias (Acts 9); (6) church members in Antioch (Acts 13:1); (7) new converts in Ephesus (Acts 19:6); (8) women at Caesarea (Acts 21:8-9); (9) the unnamed brethren of Gal. 3:5; (10) believers in Rome (Rom. 12:6-8); (11) believers in Corinth (1 Cor. 12-14); and (12) Christians in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:19-20). See also 1 Cor. 12:7-10.

(4) A fourth good reason for being a continuationist is the explicit and oft-repeated purpose of the charismata: namely, the edification of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:3, 26). Nothing that I read in the NT nor see in the condition of the church in any age, past or present, leads me to believe we have progressed beyond the need for edification and therefore beyond the need for the contribution of the charismata. I freely admit that spiritual gifts were essential for the birth of the church, but why would they be any less important or needful for its continued growth and maturation?

(5) The fifth good reason for being a Continuationist is the fundamental continuity or spiritually organic relationship between the church in Acts and the church in subsequent centuries. No one denies that there was an era or period in the early church that we might call "apostolic". We must acknowledge the significance of the personal physical presence of the apostles and their unique role in laying the foundation for the early church. But nowhere does the NT ever suggest that certain spiritual gifts were uniquely and exclusively tied to them or that with their passing is the passing of such gifts. The universal church or body of Christ that was established and gifted through the ministry of

³ The problems that emerged in the church at Corinth were not due to spiritual gifts, but to unspiritual people. It was not the gifts of God but the immature, ambitious, and prideful distortion of gifts on the part of some in that church that accounts for Paul's corrective comments. Let's not forget that whatever else one may think or say about spiritual gifts, they were God's idea!

the apostles is the same universal church and body of Christ that exists today (something that only the most extreme of hyper-Dispensationalists would deny). We are together with Paul and Peter and Silas and Lydia and Priscilla and Luke members of the same one body of Christ.

(6) Very much related to the fifth point, a sixth good reason for being a continuationist is because of what Peter (Luke) says in Acts 2 concerning the operation of so-called miraculous gifts as characteristic of the New Covenant age of the Church. As D. A. Carson has said, “the coming of the Spirit is not associated merely with the *dawning* of the new age but with its *presence*, not merely with Pentecost but with the entire period from Pentecost to the return of Jesus the Messiah.”⁴ Or again, the gifts of prophecy and tongues (Acts 2) are not portrayed as merely *inaugurating* the New Covenant Age but as *characterizing* it (and let us not forget that the present church age = the latter days).

(7) The seventh good reason for being a continuationist is because of what Paul says in 1 Cor. 13:8-12. As noted above, here Paul asserts that spiritual gifts will not “pass away” (vv. 8-10) until the coming of the “perfect.” If the “perfect” is indeed the consummation of God’s redemptive purposes as expressed in the New Heaven and New Earth, following Christ’s return, we can confidently expect him to continue to bless and empower his church with the gifts until that time.

(8) The eighth good reason for being a continuationist is because of what Paul says in Eph. 4:11-13. There he speaks of the bestowal of spiritual gifts (together with the office of apostle), and in particular the gifts of prophecy, evangelism, pastor, and teacher, as functioning in the building up of the church “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (v. 13). Since the latter most assuredly has not yet been attained by the Church, we can confidently anticipate the presence and power of such gifts until that day arrives.

(9) A ninth good reason for being a continuationist is because the Holy Spirit in Christ is the Holy Spirit in Christians. We are indwelt, anointed, filled, and empowered by the same Spirit as was Jesus. His ministry is (with certain obvious limitations) the model for our ministry (cf. Acts 10:38).

(10) A tenth reason to be a continuationist is the absence of any explicit or implicit notion that we should view spiritual gifts any differently than we do other NT practices and ministries that are portrayed as essential for the life and well-being of the Church. When we read the NT, it seems evident on the surface of things that church discipline is to be practiced in our assemblies today and that we are to celebrate the Lord’s Table and water baptism, and that the requirements for the office of Elder as set forth in the pastoral epistles are still guidelines for how life in the church is to be pursued, just to mention a few. What good exegetical or theological reasons can be given why we should treat the presence and operation of spiritual gifts any differently? None, so far as I can see.

(11) An eleventh good reason for being a continuationist is the testimony throughout most of church history concerning the operation of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. Contrary to what many cessationists have suggested, the gifts did not cease or disappear from early church life following the death of the last apostle.⁵

The ministry of Charles Spurgeon is a case in point. Read carefully the following account taken from his autobiography:

“While preaching in the hall, on one occasion, I deliberately pointed to a man in the midst of the crowd, and said, ‘There is a man sitting there, who is a shoemaker; he keeps his shop open on Sundays, it was open last Sabbath morning, he took ninepence, and there was fourpence profit out of it; his soul is sold to Satan for

⁴ D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 155.

⁵ There are numerous resources that document the presence of the gifts in history, several of which are cited in my contribution to the book, *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, pp. 200-204. See especially note 32, p. 201. After studying the documentation for claims to the presence of these gifts, D. A. Carson’s conclusion is that “there is enough evidence that some form of ‘charismatic’ gifts continued sporadically across the centuries of church history that it is futile to insist on doctrinaire grounds that every report is spurious or the fruit of demonic activity or psychological aberration” (*Showing the Spirit*, 166). For full documentation, see Ronald A. N. Kydd’s book, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* (Peabody: Hendriksen Publishers, 1984).

fourpence!’ A city missionary, when going his rounds, met with this man, and seeing that he was reading one of my sermons, he asked the question, ‘Do you know Mr. Spurgeon?’ ‘Yes,’ replied the man, ‘I have every reason to know him, I have been to hear him; and, under his preaching, by God’s grace I have become a new creature in Christ Jesus. Shall I tell you how it happened? I went to the Music Hall, and took my seat in the middle of the place; Mr. Spurgeon looked at me as if he knew me, and in his sermon he pointed to me, and told the congregation that I was a shoemaker, and that I kept my shop open on Sundays; and I did, sir. I should not have minded that; but he also said that I took ninepence the Sunday before, and that there was fourpence profit out of it. I did take ninepence that day, and fourpence was just the profit; but how he should know that, I could not tell. Then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him, so I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first, I was afraid to go again to hear him, lest he should tell the people more about me; but afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me, and saved my soul.’”

Spurgeon then adds this comment:

“I could tell as many as a *dozen* similar cases in which I pointed at somebody in the hall without having the slightest knowledge of the person, or any idea that what I said was right, except that I believed I was moved by the Spirit to say it; and so striking has been my description, that the persons have gone away, and said to their friends, ‘Come, see a man that told me all things that ever I did; beyond a doubt, he must have been sent of God to my soul, or else he could not have described me so exactly.’ And not only so, but I have known many instances in which the thoughts of men have been revealed from the pulpit. I have sometimes seen persons nudge their neighbours with their elbow, because they had got a smart hit, and they have been heard to say, when they were going out, ‘The preacher told us just what we said to one another when we went in at the door.’”⁶

What are we to make of this? My opinion is that this is a perfect and not uncommon example of what the Apostle Paul described in 1 Cor. 14:24-25. Spurgeon exercised the gift of *prophecy*. He did not label it as such, but that does not alter the reality of what the Holy Spirit accomplished through him. If one were to examine Spurgeon’s theology and ministry, as well as recorded accounts of it by his contemporaries as well as subsequent biographers, most would conclude from the absence of explicit reference to miraculous charismata such as prophecy and the word of knowledge that such gifts had been withdrawn from church life. But Spurgeon’s own testimony inadvertently says otherwise!

(12) Twelfth, and finally, although it is technically not a *reason* or argument for being a continuationist like the previous eleven, I cannot ignore personal experience. The fact is that I’ve seen all spiritual gifts in operation, tested and confirmed them, and experienced them first-hand on countless occasions. As stated, this is less a *reason* to become a continuationist and more a *confirmation* (although not an infallible one) of the validity of that decision. Experience, in isolation from the biblical text, proves little. But experience must be noted, especially if it *illustrates* or *embodies* what we see in the text.⁷

So, to sum up as briefly as I can, are miraculous gifts for today? Yes!

Discussion Questions

- (1) Describe your own experience when it comes to this debate.
- (2) How did you come to believe in the validity of spiritual gifts for today? If you don’t believe in them, why not?
- (3) What are the most persuasive/convincing arguments for both cessationism and continuationism?
- (4) Why do you think so many believers are cessationists? Is it because of the Bible or some experience they’ve had that has frightened them or prejudiced them against the possibility that the gifts are valid?

⁶ *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon* (Curts & Jennings, 1899), Vol. II, pp. 226-227.

⁷ In this regard, I would recommend my book, *Convergence: Spiritual Journeys of a Charismatic Calvinist* (Kansas City: Enjoying God Ministries, 2005) where I describe in detail several of these personal experiences.