

ARE THE SPIRITUAL GIFTS FOR THE CHURCH TODAY?

By Denver Cheddie

There are many sincere believers in the body of Christ who believe that certain gifts of the Spirit are no longer required for the church today ^[i]. According to them, the "sign gifts" were only for the apostolic age when Christianity was in its infancy. Now that the faith has already been established, and the canon of scripture closed (all the books of the Bible gathered in one Book), they are no longer needed. Such gifts are tongues, interpretation, prophesy, healing and miracles. The term **cessationist** is used to describe such believers – they believe the gifts have ceased operation. Toward the end of the 19th century, the Pentecostal movement was born which saw an increasing number of people questioning the beliefs of cessationists. They believe that the gifts of the Spirit are still for the church today and have never ceased (or should never have ceased). I refer to these as **charismatics** ^[ii].

Let it be said that there are no scriptures that explicitly teach cessationism. Jack Deere (former cessationist) has rightly said that "No one ever just picked up the Bible, started reading, and then came to the conclusion that God was not doing signs and wonders anymore and that the gifts of the Holy Spirit had passed away ... If you were to lock a brand new Christian in a room with a Bible and tell him to study what the Scriptures have to say about healing and miracles, he would never come out of the room a cessationist ... The doctrine of cessationism did not originate from a careful study of the scriptures ... [but] ... originated in *experience*."^[iii] In this

article we will examine the scriptural data pertaining to the perpetuity of these gifts.

The Experience of Church History

A cessationist may say something like this: "The fact that at some point in history the church stopped speaking in tongues, is testament that the gifts were not meant to be permanent."

I believe this is weak support for cessationism. There were many doctrines that went dormant during certain periods. Even the doctrine of justification by grace was dormant for the period prior to the Reformation. It is far more important what the Bible says than what the church did or did not do. The church, throughout the ages, has consisted of individuals who may or may not have been sincere. The practice of the apostles and church fathers is important in that it helps us ascertain how they interpreted certain scriptures. but the bible is the infallible word of God, and that alone is our source of doctrine.

Were Miracles Only for the Apostolic Age?

Comparing 2 Cor. 12:12 with Eph. 2:20 leads to the argument that since signs and wonders were characteristic of apostles, and since apostles were only necessary for the foundation period of the church, signs have ceased

together with the office of the apostle. I would readily agree that Eph. 2:20 teaches the temporal nature of apostles and prophets. I would also agree that certain miraculous signs were characteristic of all who were apostles. I would not, however, say that any of the above mentioned signs or gifts was limited to the apostles. In 2 Cor. 12:12 Paul was drawing a contrast between true apostles and fake ones, not between apostles and ordinary believers. People other than apostles worked signs and wonders e.g. Stephen (Acts 6:8) and Philip (Acts 8:6, 13). In addition, ordinary believers spoke in tongues, interpreted and prophesied. These signs marked an apostle, but not only apostles displayed them i.e. authentic apostleship required the miraculous, but miracles did not imply apostleship.

Were Signs and Wonders Solely for Verification of the Gospel?

An obvious response to this is that the gospel message is supposed to go out till the end of the age. Cessationists argue that it was only necessary while the canon of scripture was not yet completed. They claim that the miraculous was needed then because Christianity was in a transition stage. That is a fair enough argument, though it lacks biblical support. Heb. 2:1-4 does associate signs and wonders with the apostles' message. But every time the gospel is preached to a new group of people, there is a transition from their old religion into Christianity. In our modern age, signs and wonders are more prevalent during missionary work than anything else.

1 Cor. 13:8-12

8 Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies, they shall fail; whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away. 9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. 11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

These verses teach that tongues and prophesy will cease. It also says when – when the **perfect** is come (1 Cor 13:8). Cessationists say that the perfect means the close of the canon when God's written revelation is complete (perfect). Then we will no longer need prophesy and tongues, we will have the complete revelation of God – the Bible. There are numerous difficulties with this view.

- 1) Tongues and prophesy, although revelations from God, were never on the same par with scripture. So it is bogus to say that since the early church did not have a bible, they had to depend on tongues and prophesy. They depended on the apostles teachings for doctrine. Tongues and prophecies were for non-doctrinal edification. Consider the fact that Paul chose not to heed the words of one of Agabus's prophecies (Acts 21:10-14). If prophesy was on the same par as scripture, Paul could not do that.
- 2) Even now that we have the Bible (the completed canon), do we know fully even as we are known? Do we see face to face as the Bible declared (1 Cor 13:9-12)? Or do we still have to wait for that? According to 1 John 3:2, this is yet future. It will never happen until we are in heaven. The perfect comes when we are glorified, not when we are on earth.
- 3) The close of the canon was the last thing on Paul's mind since he lived with expectation that Jesus would return anytime. He never

anticipated an event called the close of the canon. As it turned out, Jesus prolonged his return, and the canon of scripture was closed, but that could not have possibly been the meaning Paul intended in 1 Cor. 13. Cessationists may wish to suggest that since the close of the canon was not predicted, the gifts will also cease without prediction. But that would be pure speculation. They cannot quote 1 Cor. 13 for support.

- 4) Was the epistle that Paul wrote to the Corinthians any less Bible than what we have? Sure they did not have all the books, but what they had was still scripture – fully inspired by God. 2 Tim. 3:16, 17 testify to the sufficiency of even an incomplete canon [^[iv]]. There was nothing imperfect about God's revelation at anytime in history. It was always sufficient for his people. Although they did not have the complete Bible of the New Testament, they had the complete **gospel** of the New Testament. So their situation concerning God's revealed word was not much different from ours. So how does this suggest that tongues and prophesy have ceased?

In 1 Cor. 13, Paul was merely contrasting the temporal nature of gifts (only needed for this life) with the eternal nature of love. The most natural reading of 1 Cor. 13 is that tongues and prophesy would be with us until the end of this age.

Acts 2:16-18, 38, 39

16 But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; 17 And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters

shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: 18 And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: 38 Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. 39 For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel to support what was being manifested in the last days (the entire time period from Pentecost to Christ's return). Verses 38, 39 teach that the Holy Spirit is for believers of all generations. Almost every time people received the Holy Spirit in Acts there was some manifestation. Was Peter speaking only of salvation, or also of the gifts of the Spirit? The strong likelihood is that he was promising the people they would receive exactly what they saw before them that day – ALL that pertained to the Holy Spirit. And this is for the entire period called the last days.

John 14:12

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater *works* than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.

Jesus teaches that believers in Him will do the same works and even greater works. Cessationists pass off this verse by claiming that the greater works refer to salvation, for there is no greater miracle than salvation. I applaud the high esteem they have for the gospel, but I question the flaky manner in which they interpret the Bible. Even if it were granted that the greater works refer to salvation, Jesus also said we would do the **same** works. Jesus was speaking of miracles, as the context would verify. The reason greater works

can be done is that He was going to his father. Now that the Holy Spirit is here, more than one person can do these great works, in fact all who believe. Greater in quantity not quality.

Who are these believers that do these great works? Apostles only? The exact same Greek phrase ***ho pisteuon eis eme*** (whoever believes in me) is used in 5 times in the Gospel of John (6:35; 7:38; 11:25, 26; 12:44-46 as well as in 14:12). In none of the other John passages is it referring to a limited group of people or for a temporal application.

Mark 16:16-18, 20

16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. 17 And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; 18 They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. 20 And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with *them*, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.

There is a dispute over the authenticity of these verses, many scholars believing that they were later additions to the gospel of Mark. As a result it would be wise to build one's case independent of this verse, as I have done. However if this passage is authentic, then that would virtually settle the debate. Cessationists have a hard time dealing with it. Some people think that "new tongues" mean you don't curse anymore. "Hey look everyone, I'm speaking in new tongues. I'm saying heck and gosh." Just to answer a fool according to his folly, in Acts 2 the disciples spoke in foreign languages. Mark 16 could only have meant unknown languages.

Some say that verse Mark 16:20 proves that the signs were for the purpose of confirming the word and since the apostles have passed away, there is no longer any need for the signs [^[v]]. I do not see how these verses ever say that. Who are the ones performing the signs? Verse 20 does include the “disciples” (as opposed to apostles) in that group. Verse 16 identifies “those who believe” as those who hear the message and respond positively. It is this same group, in verse 17, that the signs follow.

Others say that in Matt. 28:20, Jesus included the phrase “the end of the age” but did not use it in Mark 16, therefore those signs are not expected until the end of the age [^[vi]]. Needless to say that neither Matthew nor Mark gave any great commission, but only recorded parts of it. Jesus gave one great commission that included many different sayings. No gospel writer included every single detail. The end of the age time limit applies to all of the great commission that **Jesus** gave.

Healing and Miracles

It is wrongly believed that the sole purpose for miracles was for the verifying of the message of the gospel or the authenticity of apostles. They use the term “sign-gifts” when there really is no such thing. There are signs, wonders and gifts. If we were to look at the English words, signs point people to the message, wonders cause them to marvel, and gifts are given for some ministry enabling purpose. According to 1 Cor. 12:7 that purpose is the common good of the body of Christ. Healing and miracles, although by

nature signs and wonders, are gifts of the Spirit. They are given to help people and minister to their needs.

Cessationists ask some very valid questions. Why was Paul unable to heal on some occasions (Phil 2:26, 27; 1 Tim 5:23; 2 Tim 4:20)? Why does James call for elders and not those with the gifts of healing (5:14-16)? Why don't miracles occur today? The first 2 questions are not by any means difficult. The gifts of 1 Cor. 12 are called manifestations (vs. 7) and they are manifested by the Spirit as He determines (vs. 11). God does not give them to anyone permanently and unconditionally. They are manifested from time to time as God wills. No human has control over them. Even Samson in the OT could only manifest his power when the Spirit came on Him. God did not always manifest the gifts of healing in Paul's life. He alone knows why. Miracles do happen today. Admittedly not as much as in the book of Acts. But they do occur especially in missionary endeavors. And even if they did not, that does not change the message of the Bible. What we need to do is desire the best gifts and pray for them. What we need is compassion for people in times of sickness. Who knows, maybe it is the **agape** love of 1 Cor. 13 that is needed to activate the gifts of 1 Cor. 12 & 14.

Tongues, Interpretation and Prophecy

These are congregational gifts. Through them God sends his message of edification, encouragement and comfort (1 Cor. 14:3). Tongues and interpretation are almost equivalent to prophecy.

Prophecy must be tested to determine whether it is of God or not (14:29). True prophecy is always doctrinally accurate though not canonical. 2 examples of NT prophecy are given, both by Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10, 11). Both were exhortations based on future predictions. Both were accurate, and came to pass^[vii]. However it was not demanding on believers in the same way that scripture is demanding on them. Paul chose not to heed one of Agabus' prophecies (Acts 21:13).

The Bible also teaches a devotional use of tongues. Tongues without interpretation edifies the speaker (14:4). Paul spoke regularly in tongues (vs.18), but in church only did so sparingly (vs. 19). He even discourages others from doing so if they cannot interpret (vs. 28). So there is an aspect of tongues that benefits the congregation (interpretation), and another aspect that edifies the individual (devotional). Putting two and two together, we see that there is a devotional tongues that believers can use to build up themselves in their personal prayer lives ^[viii].

Conclusion

Finally I distance myself from the practices of many charismatic churches, who abuse tongues and prophecy. I agree that there are discrepancies between the tongues practiced today and tongues in the Bible. I also agree that we do not see as many miracles today as in the Bible. I also believe that "prophecy" is abused and used for the purpose of manipulating others.

But the gifts were also abused in the Corinthian church. That did not invalidate them. Paul urged the Corinthians not to be ignorant about them (1 Cor. 12:1), but rather be informed. The important question is not whether Pentecostal practices are right, but what the Bible really teaches. Charismatics prove to be a very poor example, but cessationists have a very weak Biblical case.

^[i] See Wayne Grudem, Ed. *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996) for a wide cross section of views in the subject.

^[ii] Although the term charismatic may mean different things, in this article it is defined as given above.

^[iii] Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Spirit of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 54, 99.

^[iv] The Bible was not yet fully written when 2 Tim. 3:16 was.

^[v] Edward Hills, *The King James Version Defended* (Des Moines, Iowa: The Christian Research Press, 1997).

^[vi] William McDonald, *Believers' Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 1365.

^[vii] Some argue that Agabus' second prophesy was inaccurate because he predicted that the Jews would arrest Paul, when in fact it was the Romans who did so (Acts 21:33; 22:29 cf. 21:11), Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, (Westchester IL: Crossway, 1988), 63,4. However Paul when recounting the event in Acts 28:17 declared, "I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans". The Jews, in handing over Jesus to the Romans, in effect, had themselves crucified Him. The same reasoning applies with Paul.

^[viii] Some object to this idea of devotional tongues. They prefer to think that the private tongues had to be done silently in a public gathering. But whether it is done privately or silently in public is of little difference.

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