



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

1st Corinthians 12:9-10 & 13:8-10

Topic

The apostle Paul gives scholars no justification for paring-down the list of spiritual gifts to eliminate certain sign gifts

Title

“Beware of Greek Scholars Paring [the] Gifts”

Introduction

In the 1860's the King of Siam heard that America had no white elephants. He offered to send some over. He stated to President Lincoln,

If on the continent there should be several pairs of young male and female elephants turned loose in the forest where there was an abundance of water and if the climate there should prove favorable to an elephant, we are of the opinion that after a while they will increase till the inhabitants of America will be able to catch them and tame and use them as beasts of burden making them of benefit of the country.

President Lincoln replied that the American climate was probably unsuitable and we preferred to use steam power. He refused the gifts.

Certain gifts of the Holy Spirit that are listed in the Bible are routinely refused. They are refused by those who say they are no longer operating in the church. They insist that God only intended them to last for the first century.

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The gifts in question are sometimes referred to as the sign gifts - prophecy, speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues, faith, gifts of healings, and the working of miracles.

Have they ceased? If they haven't, Why don't we see them in operation more often?

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Why Would You Disprove A Sign Gift From God?, and #2 Why You Should Desire A Sign Gift From God.

#1 Why Would You Disprove A Sign Gift From God?

(13:8-10)

Certain gifts of the Holy Spirit are called sign gifts because they typically followed the preaching of the Word of God by the apostles to signify, as a sign, that their message was true. Faith, gifts of healings, and the working of miracles are usually put into this category. Prophecy, tongues and the interpretation of tongues are usually put in this same category when discussing the gifts as they, too, seem more extraordinary.

It is argued by many competent Bible scholars that these sign gifts were given only in the first century to authenticate the message of the apostles for the initial founding of the Church. They believe these gifts have ceased. We call these men and women cessationists.

As far as I can tell, cessationists use three main arguments. The first is that sign gifts were only necessary until the completion of the New Testament.

Where would you get an idea like that? You'd get it from First Corinthians 13:8-10.

1 Corinthians 13:8 Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.

1 Corinthians 13:9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part.

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1 Corinthians 13:10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

The traditional argument for the cessation of the sign gifts is that the New Testament is the "perfect" thing that has come. Now that the "perfect" has come, there is no need for "tongues" or "prophecies."

The interesting thing about this line of argument is that most cessationists have discovered it cannot be true and have therefore abandoned it. John MacArthur, in his commentary on First Corinthians, recognizes that the "perfect" cannot be the completion of the New Testament. He writes,

...that idea would have been meaningless to the Corinthians. Nowhere in this letter does he mention or allude to such a scriptural completion. The Corinthian believers would have taken Paul's meaning in the plainest and simplest way: as a reference to spiritual and moral perfection...By process of elimination, **the only possibility for the perfect is the eternal heavenly state of believers.**

"That which is perfect" is *not* a reference to the New Testament. It refers to the future, eternal state when we are glorified and are with Jesus.

Is there another area of Scripture, then, that indicates the sign gifts would cease?

Staying with First Corinthians 13:8-10 cessationists make an argument from a verb tense. In verse eight we're told the gift of tongues will eventually "cease." The Greek scholars say the verb is in the future tense and means that tongues will 'run out of steam' of its own accord. In other words, it will start strong, but will fizzle out.

They therefore conclude that tongues have already served their purpose and have died out as an active gift. They then lump the other sign gifts with tongues.

The verse does not say that the cessation has already taken place, but that it will eventually take place. We agree! But when will the cessation take place? We just saw that it will take place "when that which is perfect has come."

Theologian Wayne Grudem writes,

...the time when “the perfect” comes must be the time of Christ’s return. Therefore, we can paraphrase verse ten: “But when Christ returns the imperfect will pass away.” Or... we can paraphrase, “But when Christ returns, prophecy and tongues (and other imperfect gifts) will pass away.” Thus we have in First Corinthians 13:10 a definite statement about the time of the cessation of imperfect gifts like prophecy: they will “be made useless” or “pass away” when Christ returns. And this would imply that they will continue to exist and be useful for the church, throughout the church age, including today, and right up to the day when Christ returns.¹

A second argument the cessationists use is that the sign gifts were only necessary in order to authenticate the message being delivered by the apostles in order to lay the foundation of the church. Once the foundation was laid, there would be no more need for prophecy, tongues, healings, or miracles.

The argument is that the only legitimate workers of miracles were the apostles. Since the apostles have all died, there can be no more legitimate miracles.

There is one huge, insurmountable problem with that argument. Jesus indicated in the Gospel of Mark that the miracles would not just follow the apostles, but all believers who preached the gospel (Mark 16:15-20).

There is really nothing in the Bible to indicate that sign gifts would cease.

Is there anything outside of the Bible? Cessationists claim that church history will show that the sign gifts ceased after the apostles died.

Not true! There are plenty of references throughout the centuries of church history to show that sign gifts continued. The problem is that scholars can be selective in searching-out history.

Let me give you just one example. While it is true that Augustine, in the fourth century, originally considered miracles to have ceased, he changed

¹ Grudem, W. A. (1994). *Systematic theology : An introduction to biblical doctrine* (1034). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House.

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his mind later in life under the influence of the North African revival. Book 22, Chapter 8, of Augustine's *City of God* is devoted to the accounts of miracles he had seen or verified.

There are many other historical accounts of sign gifts in operation right up until this day.²

Why, then, would you want to disprove the sign gifts? I can only offer an opinion. I think it's because there are so many abuses of the gifts by charismatics. When you see fake healings, phoney miracles, people being coerced into speaking in tongues, false prophecies, it sort of sours you on the sign gifts. You swing too far to the other side and try to disprove them.

Believers who abuse the gifts need correction, not cessation. The sign gifts, **all the gifts**, are for today.

#2 Why You Should Desire A Sign Gift From God

(12:9-10)

I am struck by the apostle Paul's almost nonchalant mention of extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit right alongside those we commonly consider more ordinary.

In his lists of the gifts he mentions "healings" alongside "helps"; he mentions "miracles" alongside "ministry"; he mentions "tongues" alongside "teaching." Healings, miracles, and tongues seem so extraordinary to us; helps, ministry, and teaching seem so ordinary.

Paul evidently intended for us to realize that all of the gifts are to be regarded as *both* extraordinary and ordinary:

- Gifts - all of them, no matter how ordinary they may seem to us - are to be regarded as extraordinary. They are the supernatural enabling given to believers of every age by the Holy Spirit.

² see *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church*, Ron Kydd

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- Gifts - all of them, no matter how extraordinary they may seem to us - are to be regarded as ordinary, in this sense: It should be our ordinary expectation that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit be at work in the Church.

For the purposes of our study we have put the gifts in three categories: Speaking gifts, sign gifts, and serving gifts. All are extraordinary, yet it should be our ordinary expectation that they be at work in our lives and in the life of our church.

The gift of **faith** needs to be distinguished from the faith all believers have. If you are a Christian, you have faith. The gift of faith is not simply having more faith; it's not something you learn or earn. It must be given to you by God.

The gift of faith is a supernatural enabling given to some and not to all by the Holy Spirit. It is the enabling to discern with supernatural confidence the will and purposes of God in a given situation or circumstance. It is the Holy Spirit endowing you with the confidence that God is going to work a certain way in a specific crisis or for a specific opportunity.

You often see the gift of faith at work in the New Testament in conjunction with healings and miracles. As Peter passed by the lame man at the gate of the Temple in Acts chapter twelve, he commanded him to rise up and walk. Was that a gift of healing? Was it he working of a miracle?

It was both a healing and a miracle but it would have been neither if not for the gift of faith to have the confidence that God was going to work a certain way in that specific situation!

Gifts of healings are next on Paul's list. This gift is mentioned in the plural; there are gifts of healings, not 'the gift' of healing. This suggests that each exercise of the gift of healing is a separate enabling by the Holy Spirit.

In other words, no one possesses the gift of healing to go around healing at will. It is under the sovereign control of the Holy Spirit. You don't have the gift of healing; you are granted individual gifts of healings when God sees fit to use you to heal.

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Healings occurred with some frequency in the Old Testament. Healings were a large part of the New Testament. They were a major part of the ministry of Jesus; the apostles had gifts of healings. This naturally gives rise to two questions:

1. Why the lack of healings today? and,
2. Why isn't everyone healed?

Both questions can be adequately answered by remembering that God is sovereign over gifts of healings!

Even in the life of Jesus and in the ministry of the apostles there were times that gifts of healings were not exercised. In the life of Jesus and in the ministry of the apostles there were times that not everyone was healed. In fact, the very lame man that was healed by Peter was not healed by Jesus Christ during the Lord's ministry on earth.

When God does not heal you, or give you a gift of healing for someone else, then you must believe that it is His will to allow the illness or affliction. The same apostle Paul who wrote to the Corinthians about gifts of healings and who was used to heal others also told them,

2 Corinthians 4:17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,

2 Corinthians 4:18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Paul also described a physical affliction in his own life that the Lord chose to not heal:

2 Corinthians 12:9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

A **miracle** is an event that supersedes known natural laws. Moses parting the Red Sea; Joshua parting the Jordan River; Elisha raising the

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Shulamite's dead son; Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Those are miracles.

The Gospels are crammed with miracles. The Book of Acts is crammed with miracles.

As with gifts of healings, this gift is in the plural. “Working of miracles” is the translation of two Greek words which mean *operations of supernatural powers*. No one has the gift of working miracles. Each working of a miracle is a separate gift for a special crisis or opportunity.

The apostle Paul could work miracles. So why didn't he simply calm the storm at sea instead of allowing the ship to be wrecked and swim to shore at Malta? Because in that circumstance God chose to give Paul a word of knowledge rather than the working of a miracle. Paul told the passengers and crew the boat would be lost but all their lives spared if they followed his advice.

Apparently God thought it would bring more glory to Him to allow them to go through the storm unscathed rather than to still the storm.

Some scholars have suggested that we call certain sign gifts ‘manifestation gifts.’ One description reads like this:

[These gifts are] manifestations that are available to all in the body of Christ without reservation and at the will of the Spirit. The Spirit chooses one or another to exhibit a particular Gift for the profit of all. One may be given the gifts of healing because of a hospital visit that day while the following day is given the gift of prophecy in order to communicate God's will and love to a local congregation. These Gifts are understood to be manifestations given at the time of need for the purpose at hand. Each individual if open and willing to be used by the Spirit will eventually be used at the discretion of the Spirit.

Especially in America, my observation is that the cessationist teaching permeates our churches. If you've got respected Bible teachers telling you that any modern-day manifestation of these gifts, including tongues and prophecy, are demonic counterfeits, how likely are you to desire them as gifts? You're not likely at all. Unbelief sets in and you concentrate on those gifts you are taught still function.

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Add to that the weird charismaniac behaviors of many charismatic believers and you have created a climate in which the seemingly more extraordinary gifts will be avoided and ignored.

Sign gifts were being misused and abused in Corinth. They are still being misused and abused in churches today.

Cessationism is not a recent problem, either. To the first century church at Thessalonica Paul wrote, "Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophecies" (First Thessalonians 5:19-20).

There is no compelling biblical reason to say that any of the gifts have ceased. We should instead seek to correct their abuse and use them according to scripture.

The Holy Spirit still distributes faith, gifts of healings, and the working of miracles as He sees fit. Prophecy, tongues and their interpretation are still for today.

One more qualifier. For some reason when churches who are generally cessationist suddenly get interested in the sign gifts, all biblical safeguards are abandoned. Weird excesses are considered OK because we are discovering or rediscovering what has been ignored.

That's bogus! We can discover or rediscover dormant gifts without abusing them.

Concentrate on the Giver and on sharing His love with others. Listen for the promptings of the indwelling Spirit. Do as He directs.