

To Be Continued...

The Holy Spirit & His Gifts

When folks call the church asking for information about what we believe, 99% of the time what they really want to know is what we believe about the exercising of certain gifts of the Holy Spirit.

People have very strong opinions with regards to this subject and they normally fall into one of two camps:

- Either they are cessationists who believe certain gifts of the Holy Spirit have ceased to function in the church;
- Or they are charismatics in the sense that they believe certain gifts of the Holy Spirit *must* function in almost every meeting of the church.

I always answer that we believe all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are available and operational in the church today but that they must be exercised decently and orderly.

Since we believe all the gifts continue throughout the church age, we are properly referred to as continuationists.

Just about every possible question a person might have about this issue is answered somewhere in First Corinthians chapters twelve, thirteen, and fourteen. While even I want to get to what we might consider the more 'exciting' stuff, it would be wise for us to take the chapters in order.

By way of introduction, however, I *do* want to spend some time discussing why we feel the cessationist approach is flawed.

I'm not singling out cessationists over the charismatics. We will have lots to say about charismatic errors and excesses along the way.

The cessationist argument needs answering at the outset because if you think certain gifts have ceased, it will radically affect your understanding of these chapters.

By way of clarification, the cessationists argue that certain so-called "sign" gifts have ceased, typically speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues, prophecy, healings and miracles.

One of the main arguments leveled against all the gifts continuing is historical. Cessationists either do not find anything written about the sign gifts after the first century, or they find ancient texts by Christian writers which say that the sign gifts did, indeed, cease.

You can certainly find such references to the cessation of certain gifts. But you also find many references that establish all the gifts continued.

For example Augustine is almost always cited and quoted as teaching that certain gifts ceased. However later in his life he changed his beliefs; and this is ignored.

It may not be ignored on purpose; few people are reading exhaustively through church history. But therein is a problem with citing history. How do you know what else is out there you may have missed?

Church history does not unequivocally support cessationism. No doubt there were some cessationists, but there have always been quite a few continuationists.

The historical argument against continuation of the gifts fails. In the end, it's just like it is today - with some arguing the gifts have ceased while others are exercising them.

There are biblical arguments. One main one is that certain gifts were given only to the first century apostles in order to authenticate their preaching.

One problem with that approach is a passage like this:

1Co 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

1Co 12:28 And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.

1Co 12:29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles?

1Co 12:30 Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

1Co 12:31 But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

I wholeheartedly agree that apostles and prophets were specially gifted men in the first century tasked with building the church upon the foundation of Jesus Christ.

I would cite two references in the Book of Ephesians as proof. Paul said the church was "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone," (2:20). Then he said,

Eph 4:11 [Jesus] gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

Eph 4:12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,

Putting those thoughts together we see that the apostles and prophets began the building and the work is now carried out by "evangelists... pastors and teachers."

There are no apostles today - not by the first century definition that requires an apostle to have seen the risen Christ.

And there are no prophets speaking forth the Word of God. We'll see that there is a gift of prophecy still available; but that is very different from an office in the church where someone is speaking the Word of God.

Having said that, I don't know about you, but I don't see anything in that passage that limits things like "miracles," "healings," and "tongues" to the apostles or the prophets. Quite the contrary, Paul seems to be saying there are (or were) apostles and prophets and teachers; but there were also folks who had one or more of the other gifts listed - folks who did not have the gift of being an apostle.

Cessationists try to tweak the biblical argument by saying certain gifts may have been exercised by non-apostles but that they had a shelf-life or a built-in stopping point. One such argument, leveled against the gift of speaking in tongues, is based on the verbs in First Corinthians 13:8.

1Co 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.

One of the leading cessationist pastors writes,

Though we are told here that all three gifts would someday cease to exist, two different verbs are used to indicate their cessation. Prophecy and knowledge will be "done away," whereas tongues will "cease."

Done away... means *to reduce to inactivity, or to abolish*. The gifts of prophecy and knowledge one day will be made inoperative...

Cease... means *to stop, to come to an end...* The cause comes from within; it is built in. God gave the gift of tongues a built-in stopping place... Like a battery, it had a limited... lifespan.

OK, but when was tongues set to run out of juice? There is no passage in the Bible to substantiate a particular time tongues would cease, so all the arguments as to when it supposedly did cease are extrabiblical, logical, or theoretical.

For example, this cessationist pastor writes, "it is reasonable to believe that tongues have ceased because their use is mentioned only in the earlier New Testament books. Most of the books, in fact, do not mention it."

Other cessationists pick-up on this and do things like list the writings of Paul in chronological order to try to show that his references to various gifts diminish over time. Therefore, they conclude, so did those gifts - or else, they say, Paul would still be mentioning them.

Really? That's an argument? It's not a very good one. It reminds me of our Church of Christ brothers and sisters who argue that there must be no musical instruments in the church because they are not specifically mentioned in the New Testament.

That actually makes more sense than the diminishing references argument.

With regard to speaking in tongues, in fact, it was *after* Paul wrote the passage saying tongues would "cease" that he wrote an entire chapter - First Corinthians fourteen - on the proper exercise of tongues in the church. In that chapter he says, "I wish you all spoke with tongues" (v5).

Why would he wish they all spoke with tongues, and instruct them how to exercise the gift, if it was rapidly running out of energy?

Not all scholars would agree that you should base such a tremendous, far-reaching conclusion on a verb or its tense. Gordon Fee, a renowned scholar in his own right, says,

[Some] have argued that the change of verbs with tongues has independent significance, as though this meant tongues might cease before prophecy and knowledge... [but] just as one can scarcely distinguish between "cease" and "pass away" in English, when used in the same context, neither can one distinguish between [the Greek words used] in this context.

In other words, Paul was not making a huge announcement about the cessation of a gift by choosing that particular verb. He just wasn't; or, at the very least, we cannot say without a doubt that he was.

Here is another cessationist argument. Cessationists like to stress that speaking in tongues was a lesser gift anyway because it didn't build-up others in the church service; that is was selfish.

First of all, who are we to qualify any of the gifts the Holy Spirit might offer? It seems a little rude.

Second of all, let's look at the charge that speaking in tongues doesn't build-up others.

1Co 14:4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

Point for the cessationist? Hardly! Read the next verse.

1Co 14:5 I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, **unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.**

Paul agrees that speaking in tongues does not build-up others **unless** it is exercised with the corresponding gift of interpretation; in which case it is equal in effect with prophecy and all the other gifts.

There are a lot of other cessationist arguments. These are some of the main ones and my point is to show that none of them strikes a fatal blow for continuationists like us.

Over the years I have noted that people usually have a background, and that their background can be a stronger influence on their behavior than the Bible. One time, while teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, I read the words of First Corinthians 14:2 & 3,

"For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men."

The words clearly state that, when you speak in tongues, you are speaking **to** God - *not* to men. You speak **for** God **to** men through prophecy.

Clear as that may be, one man took issue with me and was visibly upset. You see, he had grown up in a charismatic church where people would speak in tongues and then the tongues would be interpreted as God speaking to men.

He never would agree with what the Bible said! His background, his tradition, was a stronger influence on his behavior than the Bible.

I'm asking you to ignore your tradition - even if it's Calvary Chapel - and let the Word speak for itself. Search these things out and base your conclusions only on God's Word and not the traditions of men.

In the end, if we disagree - we can do it agreeably as brothers and sisters in The Lord.