

Strange Fire Conference: A Case for Cessationism

Tim Challies

October 17, 2013

Today Tom Pennington spoke at the Strange Fire conference and provided a case for cessationism. He offered seven biblical arguments for the cessation of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. Here is a summary of his session.

The label “Cessationism” is negative, but the real problem is that it has been easily caricatured as believing that the Spirit has ceased his work. But the fact is that we who are cessationists believe the Holy Spirit has continued his work. Nothing eternal happens in a person apart from the Holy Spirit. Temporal things can happen, but nothing eternal. We only believe the Spirit has ceased in one function: the miraculous gifts, such as tongues, prophecy, and healing.

Charismatics’ chief arguments for believing the gifts have continued are:

1. The New Testament doesn’t say they have ceased. But then again, it doesn’t say that they won’t either.
2. 1 Corinthians 13:10 – they say this means that only when Christ returns will the partial gifts of tongues and prophecies cease. This implies that the gifts continue. But this is an uncertain interpretation.
3. The New Testament speaks only of the church age, and so, they argue, the gifts that began the church age should continue throughout it. They say we artificially divide it between apostolic and post-apostolic eras. But they do this, too, by not believing that the apostolic office still continues.
4. 500 million professing Christians who claim charismatic experiences can’t all be wrong. But if we accept this, then logically we should accept the miracles attested to by one billion Catholics in the world. The truth is that 500 million + people can be wrong.

Cessationism does not mean that God no longer does anything miraculous. As a pastor I see miracles often. Every time a spiritually dead person comes to faith is a miraculous work of grace. Every time a person is healed solely in answer to the prayers of God’s people totally in contradiction to the medical science predictions, it is a divine miracle. If God so chose, he could allow someone to speak today in a language they didn’t previously know.

Cessationism means the Spirit no longer gives believers miraculous spiritual gifts as a normative Christian experience as it was for the apostles.

Why do we believe this?

Here are 7 biblical arguments for Cessationism:

1) *The unique role of miracles.* There were only 3 primary periods in which God worked miracles through unique men. The first was with Moses; the second was during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha; the third was with Christ and his apostles.

The primary purpose of miracles has always been to establish the credibility of one who speaks the word of God—not just any teacher, but those who had been given direct words by God. Notice in Exodus 4:15-17 that for Aaron to be Moses’ prophet he could not speak for himself. He could only speak what Moses told him to. This is what it means to be a prophet. But how were the people

to know if a man who claimed to be a prophet was in fact speaking God's own words? Moses brings this dilemma up with God at the beginning of chapter 4, and God answers by giving him signs.

God enabled Moses to perform miracles for one purpose only: to validate his claims to speak for God.

God enabled Moses to perform miracles for one purpose only: to validate his claims to speak for God. This continues to be the purpose of miracles throughout the Old Testament. Only those who spoke authoritatively and infallibly for God were given the power of miracles.

When we come to the New Testament we discover this same pattern. The primary purpose of Jesus' miracles was to confirm his credentials as God's final and ultimate messenger (John 5:36; 6:14; 7:31; 10:24-26, 37-38). Jesus' miracles were not primarily a tool for effective evangelism or about alleviating human suffering. The main reason the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus to perform miracles was to confirm that he was everything he claimed to be and that he spoke the words of God (Acts 2:22). Jesus gave this same power to the apostles, and their miracles served exactly the same purpose (Acts 14:3; cf. Hebrews 2:3-4).

Far more can be shown and said about this, but because we see this pattern throughout Scripture, it is reasonable to conclude that with the death of the apostles and end of their ministry, miracles ceased. Just as they ceased when Moses passed and Elijah and Elisha passed.

2) *The end of the gift of apostleship.* In two places in the New Testament Paul refers to the apostles as one of the gifts Christ gave his church (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4). Although not all spiritual gifts are offices, all offices are gifts to the church.

One of the gifts Christ gave his church was the apostles, but they were a temporary gift. Most agree that there are no more like the original apostles. No one meets the qualifications anymore, which included being an eye-witness of the life of Christ and his resurrection. You also had to be personally appointed by Christ and be able to work miracles (Matthew 10:1-2). According to these three qualifications, there is no one alive today who is an apostle in the sense that the original 12 were. This gift of Christ to the church disappeared after the apostolic age.

This indicates there has been a major change in the gifting of the Spirit between the apostolic age and today.

3) *The foundational nature of the New Testament apostles and prophets.* The New Testament identifies the apostles and prophets as the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20-22). In the context, it is clear that Paul is referring here not to Old Testament prophets but to New Testament prophets. Once the apostles and prophets finished their role in laying the foundation of the church, their gifts were completed.

4) *The nature of the New Testament miraculous gifts.* If the Spirit was still moving as he was in the first century, then you would expect that the gifts would be of the same type.

Consider the speaking of tongues. At Pentecost, the languages spoken were already existing, understandable languages. The New Testament gift was speaking in a known language and dialect, not an ecstatic language like you see people speaking in today.

New Testament prophecy is direct, infallible revelation. Today, however, prophecy is understood differently.

Consider also the gift of prophecy. Nowhere does the New Testament distinguish Old Testament prophecy from New Testament prophecy. Just as the Old Testament prophets spoke direct, infallible revelation from God, so did the New Testament prophets. And once it was checked against previous revelation and approved, it was added to the church's revelation. New Testament prophecy is direct, infallible revelation. Today, however, prophecy is understood differently. Wayne Grudem, who is the most able defender of this position, says modern prophecy should be prefaced with "I think this is what the Spirit is saying." This is not New Testament prophecy.

There is a disparity between New Testament and modern day healings as well.

5) *The testimony of church history.* The practice of apostolic gifts declines even during the lifetimes of the apostles. Even in the written books of the New Testament, the miraculous gifts are mentioned less as the date of their writing gets later.

After the New Testament era, we see the miraculous gifts cease. John Chrysostom and Augustine speak of their ceasing. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and B. B. Warfield all agree that the gifts ended after the 1st century and had been given only to confirm the message when it first appeared.

This raises a huge problem for our continuationist friends. How do they explain the ceasing of miraculous gifts throughout such long periods of church history?

6) *The sufficiency of Scripture.* The Spirit speaks only in and through the inspired Word. He doesn't call and direct his people through subjective messages and modern day bestsellers. His word is external to us and objective. Steve Lawson will have more to say about this.

7) *The New Testament governed the miraculous gifts.* Whenever the New Testament gifts of tongues was to be practiced, there were specific rules that were to be followed. There was to be order and structure, as well as an interpreter. Paul also lays down rules for prophets and prophecy. Tragically most charismatic practice today clearly disregards these commands. The result is not a work of the spirit but of the flesh.

These are seven biblical arguments for Cessationism. How should you respond?

If you are a cessationist, don't overreact and downplay the work of the Holy Spirit work in your life and ministry. Hold to your confidence in the all-sufficient Word. We may soon be in a minority, but we stand in the historic position of the church and in the Word. Respond wisely to the different kinds of continuationists. To the charismatics who have bought into the prosperity gospel, confront them with the biblical gospel. Challenge them to test whether they are in the faith. Graciously clarify the biblical argument for why the gifts were given and help them understand.

If you are unconvinced, don't allow yourself for the sake of peace to ignore the biblical arguments we have raised today. Don't accept the "open but cautious" position just because it is popular, but test the Scriptures yourself to see what they say.