

## SIGNS, WONDERS, AND MIRACLES

*Have the Spirit's gifts (His graces) ceased, or do they continue,  
or are they being variously dispensed?*

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It has been the testimony of the Church since the fourth century, that the “extraordinary” gifts of the Spirit ceased with the first generation of Christians. That generation included not only the apostles, but those who knew them. These gifts identified them to the churches as being the authorized representatives of Christ, specially anointed by the Holy Spirit. For example,

"And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; <sup>18</sup> "they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mar 16:17-18)

The alleged “cessation” of these extraordinary gifts or graces is said to mark the point at which the church was established, and the canon was both recorded and closed. Unfortunately, this led to the practical belief that the Holy Spirit is no longer active except as “ink on a page,” through God’s Word. He uses the Word to convict the world of sin, and He illumines the mind of the believer to understand the Word for purposes of sanctification. But otherwise, it is said, He is absent from our view. In his debates with Zwingli about the sacrament of communion, John Calvin took exception to that limited role. Zwingli saw the sacrament as a mere memorial, without the presence of the Spirit. Calvin believed that the Spirit is *at work* in the communion, actually applying the graces and benefits of the cross to every faithful believer.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, in his monumental work, *Pneumatologia* (Of the Holy Spirit, 1674) John Owen wrote of the person and work of the Holy Spirit as real and visible. No other examination of the Spirit’s work has surpassed it in depth or quality. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jonathan Edwards wrote “Religious Affections” to likewise restore balance to our understanding of the Holy Spirit, and to avoid two extremes that keep us from being submitted and effective instruments in His hand.

At the one extreme is cold **intellectualism** – bare knowledge. It produces an informational walk with Christ, a cold formality. Even if it is *passionate* knowledge, it ignores the presence and the influence of the Holy Spirit. It rejects any hint of spirituality as dangerous “enthusiasm” or emotionalism. It assumes we can understand the things of God with our natural faculties – without any need for *spiritual* understanding, as imparted, sustained, and informed by the Holy Spirit himself. It does not submit to Him as the real and tangible presence of Christ in us. It results in believers who act as though **all** gifts have ceased.

At the other extreme is passionate **experientialism** – sometimes called “charismania.” The personal experience of God, unrestrained by Scripture, leads to a number of aberrant practices. It may produce new doctrines that twist the Scriptures to justify those practices. It suggests that some Christians are *specially anointed*, as the first generation was – as if the church were still being founded, or the canon had not been closed. Many of these modern prophets, in the style of Simon the Magician, seek personal gain and influence by it. They invoke the “leading of the Spirit,” like a trump card that cannot be challenged. *Subjective* truth

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<sup>1</sup> See Gal 3.22. Their differences were resolved in a document known as the *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549). Zwinglians agreed that there is more going on in the Sacrament than our own self-generated remembrance of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. The Spirit is at work reminding us of His power in the blood of Christ. He applies the grace of the cross to us – the forgiveness of sins – through the elements, which of themselves have no power, but are empowered by faith.

outweighs *objective* biblical truth. It results in Christians who act as though **all** gifts continue today, and they are God's ordained prophets, as of old.

If neither extreme is correct (if cessation of gifts is not the real issue), several questions arise for each believer to answer from Scripture, and from personal experience: Do you see the Holy Spirit at work in you? Do you *expect* it? If the Spirit is still at work today, what does His work look like? What does it involve? The Spirit is given to every believer at conversion, without exception. How does His manifestation *now*, differ from His manifestation in the first century? How are you to interact or cooperate with Him in your sanctification and calling? *The next few pages will briefly examine those very things.*

Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Act 2:38 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

This promises that each believer receives the Spirit of God, or he is not Christ's (Rom 8.9). Listen to Calvin's comment on this verse, as to the difference between the external manifestations of the Spirit in the first century, and the continuing life-giving ministry of the Spirit today:

He promises them the gift of the Spirit, of which they saw an example in the diversity of tongues. Therefore this does not strictly apply to us. For since it was the inauguration of His Kingdom that Christ meant to set forth by these miracles, they lasted only for a time... For although we do not receive the Spirit to the end that we may speak with tongues, or be prophets, or cure the sick, or work miracles, yet He is given to us for a better use: that we may believe with the heart unto righteousness, that our tongues may be trained to true confession (Rom 10.10), that we may pass from death to life (John 5.24), that we who are poor and empty may be made rich, and that we may sound victorious against Satan and the world. Therefore the grace of the Spirit will always be conjoined to baptism, unless a hindrance arises on our part. (Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1-13; 81-82).

Michael Horton enlarges on Calvin's understanding of the operations of the Spirit today:

The Spirit effects deliverance from the kingdom of darkness, and his chief work now is to restore us to the image of God, which he does as he conforms us to the rule of life in his kingdom.

In terms of the ministry of the Spirit, then: he is given to Christ in order that redemption may be accomplished; he is bestowed on us by the Father in order that we may enter into the fullness of Christ's redemption. To effect this, not only has Christ become one flesh with us in the incarnation, but following his ascension and our baptism with the Spirit, we become one spirit with Christ (1Cor. 6.17), and forsaking this world, we ascend to the life of the world to come more and more.

This is the root of what is called *cessationism*, which is the assertion that the planting of the kingdom in the world was a one-time event. Those initial seeds fell to the ground and died to give birth to the church in the world. It further asserts that the outpouring of the Spirit into the world, as marked by rushing wind, flaming tongues, and other signs and wonders done by those who were appointed by Christ to that initial work, died with that first generation of seed. According to Eusebius (c. 300 AD), this passing away of those extraordinary gifts (or marks) has been the testimony of the church since the second century — NOT since the fourth century when Romish rule invaded the church, as some would have it. And yet, listed among Calvin's discontinued gifts was the ability to "cure the sick." Was James' command to call for the elders to anoint and pray for the healing of the sick (Jas 5.15) only for that first generation? Hardly. But "extraordinary" means are not seen, as in Act 9.40 with the raising of Tabitha; or foretelling the future as with Agabus (Act 11.28); or casting out demons (Mat 15.28). Yet

healing in "miraculous" or scientifically unaccounted for ways, continues today. But is healing imparted by the gift of individuals, or by faith in Jesus Christ ("Your faith has healed you," Luk 8.48; 18.42). Where only a few miracles were performed in Jesus' home town, it was because there was little faith there (Mat 13.58). So even Christ himself did not impose healing on anyone. The power was gracious, exercised by the Holy Spirit *through* Christ, or in his name. After Peter "healed" the paralytic, a crowd gathered; the people became very excited:

**Acts 3:12** So when Peter saw *it*, he responded to the people: "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"

Peter was not the source of the healing. What then are we to make of those who call themselves "healers"? Is what they do the continuation of a first century *gift*, or is it a sham? What about documented cases of cancer that have suddenly disappeared? Is that the continuation of first century gifts? Or is it instead the continuation of first century *grace*? *Grace* and *gift* have the same root word in Greek: *charis*. I would suggest it's a grace to the recipient and not a gift from the healer – God acts directly on them, by faith. Now, God is not *bound* to act, or it wouldn't be grace. And so sometimes we see healing, and sometimes we don't; but healing doesn't *depend* on, it isn't *caused* by, the faith of the one healed, but only on the grace of God.

Even so, there seems to be a dearth of miraculous prayer today, and of miraculous intervention by God. The things recorded in the NT no longer seem to be as evident or prevalent in the world. Is that because we are not living in a first-century culture, and the gifts have ceased? Or is it because we have little faith? Have we become blind and *indifferent* to the work of the Holy Spirit still going on in us, through us, and around us? Have we stopped looking for Him, and communing with Him, and asking Him? Have we so exalted the Transcendent God, that the Immanent God is now all but ignored? Wherever the Kingdom of God encounters the Kingdom of Darkness, in places where the Gospel is unheard of – at the very gates of hell – extraordinary activities of the Holy Spirit are still seen; but rarely in established churches. Why is that? Does that same principle we saw at the ceasing of gifts in the second century, also govern what we do and do not see today? I think it's likely.

St. Patrick (c. 389-c. 461) in Ireland, long after the death of that first generation, was the instrument of miraculous works of the Spirit that were used to largely convert a nation of pagans into followers of Jesus Christ. Was it only myth, or was it fact? If we believe it was myth, then we can have no expectation, no *faith*, that the Spirit will work in mysterious and powerful ways – *miraculous* ways – to effect God's will in the world today. Our prayers weaken as our faith weakens. "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." (Jam 5:16) And so, as if to justify our lack of faith, we define "miracle" in a way that Scripture never does: "a miracle requires the suspension of scientific laws."<sup>2</sup> But the Bible simply says it is a "wonder" or a "sign" – a portent of things to come (Heb. *mowpheth*, Strong's 4159). In the New Testament it's the same, using the Greek words *semeion* (sign), *teras* (portent), *thaumazo* (wonder), *dunamis* (power), or simply *ergon* (works). It is one thing powerfully pointing to another; it is the physical manifestation of a spiritual truth, that reveals God's Spirit at work. If we're looking for suspensions of physical laws, and not for signs of God's Spirit at work, we'll be blinded to what is going on in the heavenlies in our own time and place.

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<sup>2</sup> John Owen defined them as those operations of the Holy Spirit "which absolutely exceed the actings and compliance of human faculties;" or "effects that are really beyond and above the power of natural *causes*," not natural *laws*. "On the Holy Spirit," (*Pneumatologia*) 1674, bk. II, ch. 1.

Granted, history is linear and non-repeating. The fullness of time arrived with Christ, and the church has been on the move ever since – “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it” (Mat 11.12).<sup>3</sup> If we don’t see God actively at work in the world through our prayers and our work, it may be that we have become as domesticated as our surrounding culture. We have become passive instead of aggressive. We have become complacent instead of convinced. We have become too *weak-eyed* to see the things of the Spirit, and the activities of God in the world in which we live (Rev 3.17). So what’s the solution? Having diagnosed our spiritual blindness, **God provides this cure for it:**

"I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. (Rev 3:18 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

OK. But what do these metaphors mean? John Gill’s Commentary explains them this way:

**to buy from me gold tried in the fire;** ...[this is] *a larger measure of light and knowledge in the Gospel*, which is better than fine gold; **or** some particular graces, and a comfortable exercise of them, such as *fervent love* and *strong faith*, which is much more precious than gold; ...Christ, from whom it is to be had and from him only, does not sell it; rather, he gives it to those who come to him for it, and desire to have it, and are willing to part with all, so they may but enjoy it; ...

**and white raiment;** ... by which is meant the righteousness of Christ, which may be compared to raiment; it is upon the saints, and it is put upon them as such; it covers as a garment does, protects from injuries, keeps warm, beautifies and adorns, as raiment does; and it may be compared to white raiment for its purity and perfection; now this is to be bought from Christ, it is to be had from him, and is to be had from him freely, without money and without price; it is a free gift of grace; and even faith itself, which receives it, is the gift of God..

**and anoint your eyes with eye salve;** by which may be meant the word of God, particularly the Gospel; and anointing with it is making use of it for gaining light and knowledge: all who are without this divine revelation are in darkness, and those who reject its authority go astray; the Scriptures are the only directory, and rule of faith and practice; the law is a means of enlightening persons to see their sin and misery, and the danger they are in; and the Gospel is a light, whereby is beheld the glory of Christ, of his person and office, of his grace and righteousness, and of salvation by him; this is the Gospel of Christ, and it is to be had from him freely, even the saving knowledge of it.

... the eyes of the understanding being enlightened, men see themselves, the impurity of their hearts and nature, the imperfection of their righteousness, their impotency to all that is spiritually good, and they see that they are lost and undone in themselves; and by this, they see Christ and salvation by him: that it is *in him*, and in no other, and that it is full and suitable and for the worst of sinners, and that it is all of free grace, and that they have an interest in it; by this they have light into the doctrines of the Gospel, and have some glimpse of the glories of another world; and this is to be had from Christ, who gives his Spirit freely, and an understanding to know spiritual things; and the end [or purpose] of the advice is,

**that you may see;** who, notwithstanding the conceit that the Laodicean church had of herself, was blind. Persons may have great human prudence, great knowledge in moral things, yes, even

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<sup>3</sup> This verse speaks of believers *on the march*, not of persecutors attacking it. It’s an exhortation to them, not a warning or a lament, as many translations have it. The NIV is correct, and most Puritans understood it this way. For example, see William Gurnall’s work, *The Whole Armour of God* or *The Christian in Complete Armour*, vol 1, part 1, p. 7.

in evangelical things, as a **concept**, and yet be blind as to true *spiritual* light and experience; only those who have the Spirit of God can see spiritually and savingly...

This suggests that if there is an absence of spiritual blessings in the modern world, and if we are unable to see the hand of God actively at work in our lives, it is not a consequence of *cessationism*. Nor does the fault lie with God, or with the Spirit, as if they had stopped being active *in us*, and being active *through* us to the world around us.

Calvin saw that the Spirit has ceased being as active today as He was in the first century in extraordinary *external* manifestations of His power. He no longer acts directly, as He did in delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt. Nonetheless, the Spirit continues to be active, but now the norm – the *norm* in places where the Church is established – is to be active *in us*, as God's ordained means, conforming us to the image of Christ, and using us to further the Gospel by ordinary means. And so if we don't see marvelous things happening in the world around us, as believers in established churches, it may be that marvelous things are not happening *in us*, to make us salt and light that will cleanse and inform the world. This blindness to the work of the Spirit exists because we *will not* see – and **not** because there is *nothing to be seen*. The cause of our spiritual blindness lies in us, and not elsewhere.

If that convicts us of sin, may such conviction produce godly sorrow, repentance, and active righteousness in us. May it drive us to our knees in prayer for transformation in us, and for empowering by the Spirit to enable us to overcome the world that has become thorns and thistles around us, inhibiting the growth of the Seed who is rooted in us. If I am impotent in prayer, impotent in righteousness, impotent in faith, it's *not* because the power of God is unavailable to me by His Spirit. It's because I choose not to *use* it, not to *ask* for it – I choose not to avail myself of the Spirit's power, help, and grace promised to me (Joh 14.26; Act 1.8; 1Cor 2.4-5).

So Jesus stood still and called them, and said, "What do you want Me to do for you?"  
They said to Him, "Lord, that our eyes may be opened."

So Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes. And immediately their eyes received sight, **and they followed Him**. (Mat 20:32-34)

And yet, my goal as a follower of Jesus Christ is **not** to effect changes in myself or in the world by the power of the Spirit, as if I directed it – as if I was the sorcerer's apprentice, like Mickey Mouse in Fantasia, trying to make the broomsticks dance. My goal is to humble myself in the sight of the Lord – to become still and yielded before Him – so that **HE** will effect changes in me and in the world. But that doesn't mean I don't actively pursue righteousness. I get incensed when Christians equate righteousness with legalism; or when they discourage others and themselves from being obedient by saying, "I'm just a rotten sinner – I can do nothing good – only Christ is good... THEREFORE, knowing that I can do nothing pleasing to God, I'll just sit here wallowing in my self-denigration and sin." There is just enough truth in that to make it sound plausible; but in fact, it's *error*.

The error is in this half-statement: "I can do *nothing* pleasing to God." The missing half is this: "*except* by faith." I must place my trust in Christ and not in myself, that what I do according to his commands will be a healing balm to myself and to others. I'm not trusting Christ to make up the difference in my short-comings; I'm trusting him *completely* to USE what I'm doing obediently, to bring about his kingdom in this world, no matter how pitiful my efforts may be. What I do in the way of obedience to him, *will* glorify him: it fulfills the purposes of God, and it is therefore pleasing to Him. There's no guilt, no shame, unless I refuse to do what is being asked of me. And what exactly is being asked of me?

I'm being asked to **PRAY** – I'm *not* being asked to pray effectively. I'm being asked to **EVANGELIZE** – I'm *not* being asked to evangelize effectively. I'm being asked to **LOVE** – I'm *not* being asked to love effectively. Effectiveness is in the hands of God's Spirit. *I'm a means to an end*, nothing more. So it's not my concern whether I accomplished anything by my obedience in these areas. I only care that I obeyed. My guilt, if any, is that I am NOT doing these things regularly; it isn't that I'm not doing them well enough to see and measure the results. *That's not my responsibility*; it's not what I'm called to do. If God asks me to jump, I jump. I don't care if the walls of Jericho fall down. I care that I jump when I'm asked. The rest is in the hands of God, both as to outcome and timing.

We need to grasp the importance of seeing our own weakness, in any area of our Christian walk, as our **strength**. Why?? Because it allows the strength of Christ to be seen, so that all eyes turn towards HIM, and then to the cross (2Cor 12.9). Even so, our weaknesses, our failures, are no excuse for failing to FOLLOW Christ's example to the best of our ability, and according to our opportunities, in order to demonstrate the love and mercy of the Father in very practical ways, as Paul did by imitating Christ (1Cor 11.1). We're not trying to be better than our Teacher. It's enough that we are LIKE our Teacher (Mat 10.25) – and we must strive for *that*.

Bringing this back to cessationism, we read of Paul's miracles in Acts 19.11-12. Were those for the first century only? Or is the Spirit still at work in us and through us? We must not confuse Paul's *obedience*, with Paul's *anointing*. I can't expect that someone will be healed by touching my handkerchief. I can't expect to receive new revelation from God. I can't expect to handle vipers and not be harmed. But I CAN expect that if I love others in a Christlike way, it will be pleasing to God. I CAN expect that if I pray, God will hear my prayers and respond to them – even if He doesn't respond to them in the way I expect. I CAN expect that if I am obedient, it reflects well on God, and well on the Church, and it will have the effect that God desires it to have – even if the effect is not what I expect, and even if it is not always positive (Luk 6.22).

Jesus didn't always get a positive response to his obedience. But he obeyed anyway. And as he did, the world began to change around him: God's hand could be clearly seen because of *his obedience*.

Nothing has changed from then till now – it's all still true, if we will only be obedient, and not lose our saltiness, or put our light under a bushel.

Now that you perhaps have a better grasp of what the Spirit's ministry is – why He was given to you and what your duties are under the Gospel – make those earlier questions personal.

What do you expect from the Spirit, today? What do you hope to see Him doing in you, today? What promises has Christ made to you, that he sent the Spirit to fulfill in you, and through you?

Take a few minutes to read John chapters 14-17. Notice all the promises that Jesus made there – to *you*. How will you respond to Him today, as to what he promised you then? Remember, he has both the authority and the power to fulfill everything He promised you (Mat 28.18).

Here's how to respond: *Simply ask for what He promised, and then act in reliance on it.*

"Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive *them*, and you will have *them*. (Mar 11:24)

If you do that, you'll begin to see the Spirit at work in you and through you. You'll see that all the gifts which He has given you, He empowers and makes effective to accomplish His ends. He is ever visibly at work in you and in the world, if you're watching to see Him at work.