

Do Cessationists Have Any Evidence at All to Support Their Theory?

I read with interest James Lasher's excellent review of the "Cessationist" movie. I also noted that earlier this month, Pastor John MacArthur hosted a Cessationist Conference at his Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California.

I was reminded of an interesting encounter I had years ago that highlighted how flimsy is their argument for the cessation of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I Challenge a Seminary Professor with Historical Facts

I had just published the first edition of my book *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity* (now published by Charisma House) and was attending the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. ETS is an academic society whose members are, for the most part, cessationists.

I attended a workshop attended by about 200 pastors and college professors in which a white-haired seminary professor presented an argument for the cessation of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. His argument centered around 1 Corinthians 13:9-10 (NKJV), where Paul said, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away."

He argued that the "perfect" to which Paul refers is the New Testament canon. Therefore, when the New Testament canon was completed in the final decade of the first century, the miraculous spiritual gifts were no longer necessary and were withdrawn from the church.

When it came time for questions, I raised my hand. Based on

the documented evidence in my book, I asked, "How does your cessation theory deal with the fact that church fathers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Augustine, all speak of miraculous gifts in their midst, including speaking in tongues?"

Since he was a well-known theologian, I expected him to have some sort of answer. I was, therefore, surprised when he said, "I can't answer that" and quickly moved on to the next question.

No Historical Evidence for the Cessation of Miracles

Indeed, the cessation argument from the Bible is flimsy. That which is "perfect," on which the professor based his argument, is not referring to the New Testament canon, but to the Lord Jesus Himself when He comes the second time in power and glory.

In addition, there is absolutely no historical evidence for a cessation of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. Those who succeeded the 12 apostles as leaders in the church express no knowledge of a cessation theory, and they report healings and miracles of which they are personally aware.

For example, Augustine (354-430), considered one of the greatest of church fathers by both Catholics and Protestants, describes various miracles of which he is aware. These include healings of blindness, gout, hemorrhoids and even one person raised from the dead. He then says, "I am so pressed by the promise of finishing this work that I cannot record all the miracles I know" (Hyatt, "2,000 Years of Charismatic Christianity," 44-45).

The Contextual Reason for a Cessation Theory

A cessation theory did eventually emerge in the church after the time of Constantine to explain the absence of miracles in most of the church. With Constantine's conversion and the

church becoming the “official” religion of the empire, the church became obsessed with her newfound wealth and political power. This, in turn, had a devastating effect on its spiritual condition.

For example, John Chrysostom (347–407 A.D.), patriarch of Constantinople, complained that the character of the church of his day was no different from that of the marketplace or theater. He wrote:

“If anyone is trying or intending to corrupt a woman, there is no place, I suppose, that seems to him more suitable than the church. And if anything is to be sold or bought, the Church appears more convenient than the market. Or if any wish to say or to hear any scandal, you will find that this to be had here more than the forum without” (Hyatt, “2,000 Years of Charismatic Christianity,” 34-35).

It is, therefore, not surprising that when he came to 1 Corinthians 12 in his commentary, Chrysostom admitted to having no knowledge of these miraculous gifts. He says, “The obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and their cessation.”

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This correlation between the moral corruption of the church and the absence of miracles was pointed out in a humorous manner by the famous theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-74 A.D.), when visiting Rome and being shown the church’s wealth by Pope Innocent IV. Innocent said to Aquinas, “You see that the Church is no longer in an age in which she can say, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’”

Aquinas replied, “It is true, nor can she say to the lame man, ‘Rise up and walk.’”

John Wesley made this same point after reading a book published in 1713 by John Lacy, who presented a powerful biblical and historical argument for the continuation of the miraculous gifts in the church. Lacy also defended the Montanists, a 2nd-century prophetic movement that was declared heretical by the Council of Constantinople. After reading the book, Wesley wrote:

I was fully convinced of what I had once suspected: (1) That the Montanists, in the second and third centuries, were real Scriptural Christians; and (2) That the grand reason why the miraculous gifts were so soon withdrawn, was not only that faith and holiness were well nigh lost, but that dry, formal, orthodox men began even then to ridicule whatever gifts they had not themselves, and to decry them all as either madness or imposture (Hyatt, "2,000 Years of Charismatic Christianity," 29).

This was the also the of argument of the noted Baptist pastor A.J. Gordon (1836-95), founder of Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts. In his book, *The Ministry of Healing*, he wrote:

"It is not altogether strange that when the church forgot her citizenship in heaven and began to establish herself in luxury and splendor on earth, she should cease to exhibit the supernatural gifts of heaven" (Hyatt, 2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity, 36).

The Conclusion of the Matter

The modern cessationists are wrong, without a leg to stand on either biblically or historically. They seem to try and make their case by cherry-picking the most bizarre examples they can find of charismatics supposedly expressing gifts of the Holy Spirit. Sadly, they have a lot to choose from.

☒ However, examples of charismatics acting in a fleshly and eccentric manner do not invalidate the real gifts of the

Holy Spirit. The presence of the false does not call for a rejection of all spiritual gifts but a call to be more diligent in “test[ing] the spirits,” as we are admonished throughout Scripture, including 1 John 4:1.

Indeed, miracles have been a part of the life of the church throughout history. Their presence has waned at times in history, not because of some fiat from God but because of the backslidden condition of the church.

When times of revival have been fanned into flame, and the lost passion for the Lord renewed, miracles and answers to prayer once again have become a part of the life of the church. {eoa}

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Dr. Eddie Hyatt has created a course on the continuance of spiritual gifts throughout church history. It consists of the textbook, “2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity,” and the 20-Lesson Study Guide titled “Revival History.” Both are available from Amazon and his website at . To access a video discussion of this issue, click this link.