

John MacArthur, Cessation Theology and Trainspotting for Cave Dwellers

The arrogance of making experience into a theology that trumps Scripture is exceeded only by the arrogance of making lack of experience into a theology that trumps Scripture.

In Irvine Welsh's dark Scottish novel *Trainspotting*, a bum living in an abandoned train station tells others he is watching for trains. Of course it is useless. It is useless there, at least, in that abandoned station. Trains still run elsewhere in Scotland. Just not there.

Here is a simple truth: Just because trains don't run past your house doesn't mean there's no such thing as trains. Furthermore, if there are no trains where you are, why not check out other, more active train stations? Trainspotting for cave dwellers is dismally disappointing business, and train denial is absurdly arrogant.

I was in a remote village deep in the Peruvian rain forest when a jet coursed through the sky overhead. The chief asked if that is how I came to Peru, which launched a long, comic community discussion of air travel. The kibitzers around us joined in with ludicrous comments on how airplanes looked and worked, all of which were utterly absurd. Finally I paced off what I thought were the dimensions of a 707, which may have been as far off as their ideas were. When they realized what I was showing them could have held every person in their village, the arguments and denials went up in intensity. Finally the chief raised his hand and spoke what to this day seems like great wisdom:

"I have never seen an airplane except up there in the sky. I cannot imagine what something like that looks like on the

ground. They look very small to me in the sky, but birds look smaller to me in the sky."

His own wife objected, "Why should we believe this man?"

He answered her with a question: "Why should we doubt him? He got here somehow. I hope someday to see an airplane on the ground. Until then I will just wait."

Remarkable and memorable wisdom from a man who lived in a hut.

Cessation theology, so-called, is, astonishingly enough, exactly what it denounces: completely nonbiblical. There is absolutely no clear biblical statement that the gifts of the Spirit have gone anywhere, especially away. How could they go away? What could that possibly even mean? The Holy Spirit has not taken the last train for the coast. The gifts are His gifts. They were not the possession of the apostles nor of the church in any time or location. Where the Spirit is, the gifts are.

Why those gifts are more or less visible in action at various periods of church history is a valid question—a profoundly convicting question. Why they are sometimes, perhaps even frequently, misused and abused is another valid question—an even more convicting question. Gatherings of concerned and loving believers should be held to sort through these painful questions and others.

Denouncing all who dare to believe in the validity of biblical gifts in this and every age is a cave-dweller's point of view: Because I have never seen a train, there are no trains. It also smacks of an incredible conceit. "If God were going to manifest His gifts anywhere in any time among any group, it would surely be now among me and my friends." Hmmm.

On Jan. 6, 2012, an American conductor driving his train 30 miles an hour too fast wrecked while texting. A Spanish conductor who wrecked his train was talking on the phone at

the time. On Aug. 13, the pilot and the co-pilot of a British airliner both fell asleep in flight. Fell asleep! Other pilots have been caught napping, flying under the influence and even landing at the wrong airport. Yet despite our outrage at such shenanigans, we still board airplanes and ride trains. We do not deny their existence, and we do not assemble conferences denouncing all pilots as reprobate frauds and all those who trust them as misguided fools.

It is sophomoric and dismissive to discount the validity of anything—any philosophy, faith or belief—on the grounds that some or even many of its proponents are other than what they should be. This is the very reasoning that atheists use to dismiss Christianity because of the Crusades or the war in Ireland. Imagine how ludicrous it would be to dismiss Calvinism out of hand because some organizations have espoused unbiblical stands on moral issues such as the ordaining of homosexuals.

Many years ago, I pastored a country church in Georgia—several of whose members still doubted Neil Armstrong ever walked on the moon. Despite the fact it was televised—or perhaps because it was—several folks in my church denied the reality of the entire event. Nothing could convince them otherwise. In part, they were simply dubious of the government and reckoned anything on television was no more “real” than *Bonanza*. An even stronger factor in their disbelief, however, was the fact that the very possibility of such a thing as a man on the moon was beyond their wildest imagination. Because they couldn’t imagine it, they also could not imagine anyone else could imagine it, let alone make it happen.

The insularity of unimaginative country folk with regard to space travel is excusable if a bit humorous. The willingness of educated sophisticates in the body of Christ to assume God has withdrawn the gifts of the Spirit simply because they have not seen them lately is outrageous. To castigate those who claim to have seen them as charlatans or beguiled ignoramuses

is reprehensible.

One cessation writer blogged, "Some of my best friends are charismatics." Really? I mean, *really*? It is always the most prejudiced who claim that among their "best friends" are blacks or Jews or whomever it is they then proceed to defame. Such a statement is simply an insult.

Furthermore, it is not only insular to dismiss the operation of the gifts out of hand, it is also ethnocentric at a level as to verge on racism and American neo-imperialism. The current flow of God's Holy Spirit is a worldwide reality.

There are African villagers who cannot read one word of anything written by American Calvinists but who move in New Testament power and for whom there is no other normal than the gifts of the Spirit. They would certainly be surprised to hear that Americans in megachurches have announced the gifts have been withdrawn. "You cannot find the gifts?" they would ask. "Come to Africa. They are here."

Finally, one apologist for cessationism writes that "God has decided" the season of the gifts is over. Are you sure? If false prophecy is blasphemy—and it is—then announcing what "God has decided" without finding the decision clearly—*clearly*—announced in Scripture is certainly dangerous business. How does he know what God has decided? He assumed he knows what God has decided because surely God would not use someone else, somewhere else. Surely. If that writer has not seen a train for a while, then surely the trains don't run anymore, anywhere.

The problem is the Bible never says the gifts would stop this side of heaven. That is the crux. Show me in the Bible. That is the bottom line.

Trainspotting is difficult business in a cave. Sitting around a campfire with blokes who live in the same cave telling each other trains no longer exist is just as likely to produce

narrow-gauge thinkers who accuse others of blasphemy and excuse their own spiritual envy.

Get out of your cave. Get out in the world. Meet those who believe in trains—who, God forbid, claim to have actually ridden on them, as unimaginable to you as that may be. Instead of justifying your position by propping up pathetic and bogus straw men whom you delight in setting fire to, why not engage in meaningful discussion with heavyweights?

Get out of the cave where you and your cave-dwelling friends clap each other on the back and congratulate yourselves that you can see charlatans for what they are. Open your eyes to men like Dr. Paul Walker, Dr. Jack Hayford, Tommy Barnett and Dr. Doug Beacham. There is a big world outside—just outside the mouth of your tiny and dark cavern. Be brave. Go on, be brave. Step out into the light and just see what is out there.

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