

What Cessationists Really Think About the Supernatural

As the pastor of a Primitive Baptist church, my friend Charles Carrin was an ardent cessationist and entrenched five-point Calvinist for many years. He subscribed—as all cessationists do—to what I believe to be an unbiblical view: that God by His own will “ceased” long ago to deal with His people in a direct manner supernaturally. No more supernatural healings. No visions. No direct revelation. None of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in operation.

Cessationists do believe in the supernatural occurrences in Scripture, of course, but they have no expectation that God will intervene supernaturally today except, perhaps, through providence. But the notion of the gifts of the Spirit being in operation today, as in 1 Corinthians 12:10-12, is out of the question.

Even so, one day my Baptist friend prayed something like this: “Lord, I want to be filled with Your Holy Spirit, but I have three conditions: I don’t want to shout, I don’t want to be spectacular and I don’t want to speak in tongues. Now, with that in mind, You may proceed.”

Nothing happened.

As it turns out, he was also a chaplain at the federal prison in Atlanta. He was assigned to a man who had been converted and filled with the Holy Spirit after being imprisoned. Whereas Charles went weekly to minister to this man, the prisoner began to minister to Charles. It is one of the most amazing reversals of role I have come across.

Little by little Charles became hungry for God in a fresh way. After a long while he became willing to ask this prisoner to lay hands on him—with the prison guards watching. He invited

the Holy Spirit to fall on him without any preconditions. He was filled with the Holy Spirit that day and was never to be the same again. He was eventually forced to resign his church.

Let's Be Fair With Cessationists

One should never underestimate our cessationist friends' love for God, Scripture, sound teaching and holy living. They are the salt of the earth. Some of them are among the greatest vanguards of Christian orthodoxy.

I repeat: They certainly do accept the miraculous in the Bible. They simply do not believe that God reveals Himself immediately and directly by revelation anymore. God, of course, could do it, they argue; He has simply and sovereignly chosen not to show His power as He did in the earliest church.

The absence of power, therefore, to the cessationist is not owing to our unbelief, lack of faith or expectancy. God Himself decided that kind of power was for the earliest church. Any amount of praying, fasting, intercession and waiting on God will not bring about His power. You cannot twist God's arm to do what He decreed isn't going to happen.

Cessationists do not want to appear smug or unreachable; they simply don't believe the claims of charismatics and Pentecostals who have reportedly seen the miraculous. They are not questioning our honesty; they feel we have been either too optimistic, perhaps gullible, if not actually deceived.

Furthermore, cessationists understandably get turned off by flamboyant healing evangelists who make their extravagant claims. What causes some cessationists to dig in their heels is not only the lack of hard evidence, but also that the claims to healing miracles are so often surrounded with Hollywood-style showmanship and questionable teaching. These television evangelists sometimes appear like movie stars who love the attention.

What's more, those people who are said to be slain in the Spirit and fall backward are also supposedly healed. That is certainly the impression that is given. But when honest skeptics who want to get to the bottom of the claims go back to these same people to interview them, the results are often rather sobering. It often turns out that very few, if any, were actually healed. This scenario has been repeated again and again.

I can truly sympathize with cessationism. It seems to me the extravagant claims and lifestyles of many healing evangelists are far removed from the humility of the early apostles. I also find it disquieting when prominent healing evangelists absolutely forbid people in wheelchairs from being pushed to the front of the auditorium before the services. Ushers are positively told not to let people in wheelchairs be positioned near the stage; it draws attention to them, especially when the handicapped people are not called out to be prayed for.

It wasn't always this way. In the years between 1949 to 1951, it was very different. I have good reason to believe that healings of crippled people actually took place then. People in wheelchairs were welcomed—and often healed. They often carried their own wheelchairs back to their cars. And they stayed healed.

I will tell you why I believe this. I have personally talked with three men (and others who knew them well) who were very prominent in the healing ministry in the 1950s. They have shown me photographs, letters and testimonies of people who wrote to them. I got close enough to some of these men to know they were not making things up.

What convinced me further is when they also admitted that the healings came to a halt. They were vulnerable to admit to this. It made me feel that the photographs and letters were genuine. But for some reason the miraculous healings diminished in the 1950s, although some of the evangelists did

their best to keep praying for people as they had previously done—but with fewer results.

It's a Hypothesis, Not Dogma

Here is the ultimate truth about all this: Cessationism is a hypothesis. It is not a teaching grounded in Holy Scripture—like the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the resurrection of Jesus and salvation by the blood of God's Son. Cessationists have *chosen* to believe God does not reveal Himself directly and immediately today.

I do think, however, that many cessationists would sincerely welcome supernatural healing if they actually saw a person healed or if they themselves were healed (should they become willing to be prayed for) and remained healed. Most cessationists would be thrilled with a miracle, if indeed it was genuine and they had the undisputed facts before the healing and after the healing.

I know some cessationists become open to the miraculous when one of their own loved ones becomes seriously ill. God sometimes uses a critical illness to get our attention. I don't mean to be unfair, but there is nothing that changes the mindset of a cessationist like one's own fatal illness or the serious sickness of a loved one. That often makes them open in a way they would not have been before. General Douglas MacArthur used to say, "There are no atheists in foxholes." So, too, desperation is something God may use to give us a wake-up call.

But what would worry me is this: if cessationists would be disappointed if the irrefutable evidence of genuine healings came forth. It is surely not good if they turned the hypothesis of cessationism into a dogma and then would resent it if a person were miraculously healed. If only such people would uphold cessationism as plan B in the event God might intervene and show His undoubted power.

Perhaps It's for Our Good

Sometimes it actually happens—a cessationist is convinced of a miracle and changes his or her views. But not often. Why? I cannot be sure.

But I have my own hypothesis: to test the faith of those who actually see the miraculous but have to enjoy it in relative solitude without their friends being convinced. That solitude can become downright painful—when one's integrity is questioned and yet one knows for a fact what God did. It's like the earliest church being convinced of Jesus' resurrection, whether they saw the resurrected Christ or because of the immediate and direct witness of the Spirit. It was so real to them and so foreign to others.

But what if God in some cases keeps some skeptics from seeing the miraculous even though it actually takes place? What if miracles are largely for those believers in God's family who have accepted the stigma of being "outside the camp" (Heb. 13:13)?

After all, why didn't the resurrected Christ appear to everybody on Easter Sunday? One might choose to argue that this would have been a reasonable thing to do if God truly wanted everybody to believe in His Son. Why did Jesus reveal Himself only to a few? Why didn't Jesus knock on Pontius Pilate's door on Easter morning and say, "Surprise!"? Why didn't Jesus go straight from the empty tomb to Herod's palace and say, "Bet you weren't expecting Me!" He appeared only to a few—those who were His faithful followers.

I also suspect that God sometimes allows just a little bit of doubt when it comes to the objective proof of the miraculous. This keeps us humbled. And sobered. Pastor Colin Dye of London's Kensington Temple has put it like this: "Miracles always leave room for doubt, as they were not intended to replace faith, only to reveal the heart. Also, the fact that

Jesus' miracles in Galilee were not believed shows that the very best of them were not knock-down proofs for those who are hard of heart and unbelieving, and to reject their testimony is to bring greater judgment on those who witness them. Perhaps it is out of God's mercy that God is pleased sometimes to withhold them, at least until the time is right to bring to light the true state of people's hearts—to bring in the elect and to reveal the apostates."

Perhaps you and I need patience while our friends or loved ones are totally convinced "there's nothing to it" when it comes to the miraculous. After all, how could Peter prove that Jesus had ascended to the right hand of God on the Day of Pentecost? He couldn't. But he believed it. And all the rest could do was to believe his word—or reject it.

Let the Spirit Vindicate Us

Jesus was "vindicated by the Spirit" (1 Tim. 3:16, NIV) in the days of His earthly ministry. This meant He got His approval through the Holy Spirit from the Father alone—not from people's approval. It also referred to His followers who were drawn to Him in faith by the Holy Spirit.

Faith is a gift of God (Acts 13:48; Eph. 2:8-9). This means those who believed in Jesus had been drawn to Him by the Spirit (John 6:44). And Jesus' vindication by the Holy Spirit continues to this day. Even though He is at the right hand of God and is highly exalted in heaven, the only ones who believe this are those whose hearts have been drawn to Him by the Holy Spirit.

My hypothesis, then, is that the principle of vindication by the Spirit is at stake when it comes to the miraculous. Vindication by the Spirit is an internal vindication. The Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts.

Furthermore, those who are faithful believers in Jesus' power today are more likely to see His healing miracles than those

who say, "I will believe it when I see it." In other words, as Jesus appeared to those who were previously drawn to Him, it may be that God shows His manifest power to those who have previously believed He is willing to show His glory.

Could it be, then, that God withholds the lack of hard evidence to skeptical people for *our* sakes? If so, it becomes a rather huge testing for us. The issue is this: Will you and I still be faithful if our cessationist friends never see God's manifest power for themselves? Many of us would so love to be openly vindicated. But what if God is behind the withholding of His manifest power to our critics in order that we get our vindication not from people's approval but from the Father alone? This would mean that we, too, are vindicated by the Spirit—His internal witness—and not by the external, visible and tangible proofs of His power.

God could show His healing power at any moment. For instance, a few years ago I received a curt letter from a very close friend. He lovingly chided me for my associations with Pentecostals and charismatics. But since he wrote me that letter, his own daughter became critically ill and was expected to die. The very charismatics he would not normally turn to prayed for his beloved daughter. She was gloriously healed. And stayed healed. My friend made a 180-degree turn. He announced to his friends, "I am a Baptist charismatic."

But why doesn't God do that all the time? You tell me.

My point is simply this. Let us not live for the vindication of our theological views. God wants us to receive the praise that comes from Him alone (John 5:44). If we became openly vindicated of our position that God manifests His power and glory today through the gifts of the Spirit, we might succumb to the praise of people. We could. We all have fragile egos. God forbid that this should happen to us—that we would start saying, "I told you so."

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