

Why Do Reformed Cessationists Quote Church History as Gospel?

Although it is common for my Calvinist, non-charismatic friends to point to church history in support of their cessationist position, it's really a mistake for them to do so. A big mistake. Church history actually works against them.

The first reason is the most obvious. Reformed cessationists, like me, are in the Protestant, rather than Catholic, camp of the church. That means that we believe that, in some very fundamental ways, much of the church lost its way through history, because of which a massive reformation was needed. Many Reformed Christians even argue that Roman Catholics are not Christians at all, meaning that roughly half of all professing Christians today are *de facto* disqualified.

On what basis, then, does a Reformed cessationist appeal to church history, when so much of that history is rejected from the outset?

If the argument is that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit which were normative in New Testament times gradually disappeared from church history, what do these cessationists do with Roman Catholic miracles through the centuries? They must reject them as counterfeits or frauds. As a result, they appeal to church history while rejecting large portions of that history that violate their narrative. This is quite a double standard.

And on what basis can a Reformed cessationist argue *against* God restoring something that was lost in light of the whole premise of the Reformation? Pentecostals and charismatics believe that, even though there was definitely a decrease in the use of these miraculous gifts at certain points in church

history, there is no doubt that they have been powerfully restored in the last 150 years.

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Yet it is the very essence of Protestantism to argue that, in much larger ways, things that were part of the early church were subsequently lost to history, only to be recovered by Luther and the other reformers. As British theologian Andrew Wilson rightly noted, “this sort of argument—that, since something gradually disappeared from the church over the course of the first two or three centuries, it must therefore be invalid—should strike any five *sola* Protestant as providing several hostages to fortune.”

As one popular website states, the Reformation slogan, *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, “the church reformed, always being reformed,” is meant to ensure “that our hearts, lives and practices are being reformed by God’s Word.” That’s what we have been calling for for decades: let us continually reform our practices, beliefs and attitudes by what is written in the Word.

A second reason why church history works against Reformed cessationists is that there is clear testimony that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit did *not* cease with the death of the apostles.

Representative quotes include:

- Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho” (written around 160 A.D.): “For the prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time.”
- Irenaeus of Lyon in “Against Heresies” (180 A.D.): “For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe, and join themselves to the

Church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come: they see visions, and utter prophetic expressions. Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for many years. . . . We do also hear many brethren in the Church, who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages."

- Basil the Great (350 A.D.): "The Spirit enlightens all, inspires prophets, gives wisdom to lawmakers, consecrates priests, empowers kings, perfects the just, exalts the prudent, is active in gifts of healing, gives life to the dead, frees those in bondage, turns foreigners into adopted sons."

The position of Augustine (354-430) is often quoted, as he "stated quite specifically that Christians are not to look for continuance of the healing gift" (in the words of Morton Kelsey, "Healing and Christianity"). He also stated that the gift of tongues had ceased in his "Homilies on the First Epistle of John."

But Augustine decidedly changed his views while completing his *magnum opus*, "The City of God."

There he spoke of coming to realize "how many miracles were occurring in our own day and which were so like the miracles of old and also how wrong it would be to allow the memory of these marvels of divine power to perish from among our people. It is only two years ago that the keeping of records was begun here in Hippo, and already, at this writing, we have nearly 70 attested miracles." ("City of God," XXII.8, cited in Morton Kelsey, "Healing and Christianity")

And, as I previously mentioned, if church history is used to argue that the gifts dissipated and disappeared, then church history (in contemporary times) proves the opposite. (For a detailed, carefully documented survey of contemporary

miracles, see Craig S. Keener, "Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World"; for the larger exegetical and philosophical underpinnings, see Keener, "Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts")

A third reason that Reformed cessationists should not cite church history to support their position is that the Calvinistic distinctives of their faith cannot be traced to the earliest church fathers but rather to Augustine, despite some claims to the contrary (conveniently, see [here](#) and [here](#)).

I have sometimes heard Reformed teachers claim that Augustine recovered what Paul had taught, meaning that the disciples of the apostles failed to grasp Paul's teaching and it was only Augustine, three centuries later, who really got it. Consequently, the evidence for Reformed/Calvinist theology is weakened (if not undermined) by the earliest centuries of church history, the very period of history they use to argue that the gifts had ceased.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, Reformed cessationists believe in the sufficiency of Scripture, and while church traditions and creeds can be respected, only the written Word of God has final authority.

That is my position as well, which is the ultimate reason why I am not a cessationist: not only does the Word of God fail to support cessationism, it consistently supports the continuationist position.

And whereas many cessationists admit that there is no specific verse in the New Testament that states the gifts will cease before the Lord returns, there are quite a few verses that speak of their continuance, including verses that urge us to pursue these gifts earnestly, including 1 Corinthians 14:1: "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy." This is a command from the Lord, not a suggestion. (Among many other verses, see also John

14:12; Acts 2:14-21, 39; 1 Corinthians 14:26, 39; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21; James 5:13-16.)

What the Word says alone is more than enough for me, and when you add in the glorious testimony of the Lord's miraculous acts worldwide today, you have all the proof that you need. Let us embrace the Spirit's work to the glory of Jesus' name.
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