

How to Combat Strange Fire Cessationism Biblically

I am a Reformed continuationist, or as some would put it, a charismatic Calvinist. Simply put, I believe in predestination and I pray in tongues. Those who sponsored the Strange Fire conference last fall in Southern California regard that as the intellectual equivalent to a square circle or promoting the value of fried ice. How can someone who believes in the sovereignty of God's saving grace pray expectantly for God to heal the sick? How can someone who delights in the deep things of God's Word also pursue prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1) and other revelatory gifts of the Holy Spirit?

I once asked similar questions. In fact, for my first 15 years of public ministry, I envisioned the typical charismatic as intellectually lazy and emotionally unstable, someone whose Christian life was a Spirit-empowered leap from one mountaintop experience to another. Mature, godly followers of Jesus, so I thought, never moved when they worshipped (other than to turn the pages of a hymnbook), and by no means, for heaven's sake, did they ever dance in church!

So what happened? How did I become a charismatic?

I can only attribute this shift, first in my thinking and subsequently in my experience, to my belief in the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, or Scripture alone.

In 1988, and most assuredly by the grace of God, I resolved that my theology would be shaped by the supreme authority of God's Word. That doesn't mean other factors, whether from culture, history or personal experience, make no contribution whatsoever. It simply means Scripture is the final authority by which all truth claims must be judged.

Thus, I determined not to let the fanaticism of a few (or even

of many) or the fear of guilt by association with them dictate what I would and would not believe. I rejected cessationism because, in the solitude and safety of my office, I became convinced the Bible didn't teach it. It was my belief in the inspiration, finality and sufficiency of God's Word that proved fatal to the notion that certain gifts of the Holy Spirit were no longer valid in the life of the believer and church today.

That isn't to say my cessationist friends lack what they believe is biblical evidence for the cessation of so-called "miraculous" gifts of the Spirit. On several occasions at the Strange Fire conference and in numerous conversations that followed, I would hear an appeal made to Ephesians 2:19-20 as proof of their position. In fact, there is a sense in which this passage might be described as the cessationist go-to text, the biblical trump card, so to speak, by which they hope forever and finally to silence the charismatic witness.

Here is what the apostle Paul wrote in that passage: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:19-20, ESV).

Most cessationists insist that, according to the analogy Paul employs, apostles and prophets belonged to the period of the foundation of the church and not its superstructure. That is to say, these two groups and their respective gifts were designed by God to operate only during the early years of the church's existence in order to lay the once-for-all foundation.

During the conference, in his session devoted to articulating arguments for cessationism, pastor Tom Pennington stated that "once the apostles and prophets finished their role in laying the foundation of the church, their gifts were completed," which is to say they ceased to function and eventually ceased

to exist.

But is that what Paul actually says? I think not, and for several reasons.

Cracks in the Foundation

The cessationist argument fails to take note of verses 21-22, where Paul refers to the superstructure of the church as under construction, so to speak: "... in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." (Note the consistent use of the present tense in these verses.) To sum up Paul's intent here, the apostles and prophets mentioned in verse 20, among whom was Paul, were also contributing to the superstructure, of which the Ephesians were a contemporary part, simultaneous with their laying the foundation on which it was being built.

To use an analogy, consider this. Once a man establishes a company, writes its bylaws, articulates its vision, hires its employees and does all the work essential in laying the foundation for its future work and productivity, he does not necessarily cease to exist or serve the company in other capacities. As Jack Deere points out in *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*, "The founding director of a company or corporation will always be unique in the sense that he or she was the founder, but that does not mean the company would not have future directors or presidents."

Furthermore, in the cessationist's view, all New Testament prophets functioned foundationally. But there is nothing to suggest that the prophets mentioned in Ephesians 2:20 is an exhaustive reference to all possible prophets in the church. Why should we conclude that the only kind of prophetic activity is foundational in nature, especially in light of what the New Testament says about the extent and effect of prophetic ministry?

It simply isn't possible for all prophetic utterances to be part of the once-for-all foundation of the church. For one thing, the New Testament nowhere says they were. For another, the New Testament portrays prophetic ministry in an entirely different light from the one most cessationists attempt to deduce from Ephesians 2:20. Surely not everyone who ministered prophetically was apostolic. Therefore, the cessation of the latter is no argument for the cessation of the former.

To suggest that Ephesians 2:20 has in view all possible prophets active in the early church does not measure up to what we read about the gift of prophecy in the rest of the New Testament. Are we to believe that all those who prophesied on the Day of Pentecost—sons and daughters, young men, old men, bondslaves, and both men and women, as quoted by Peter, referencing Joel 2—were laying the foundation of the church? Are we to believe that “all mankind” (Acts 2:17, NASB) in the early church were contributors to its once-for-all foundation?

The cessationist is asking us to believe that the long-awaited promise in Joel 2 of the unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all mankind with its resultant revelatory activity of dreams, visions and prophecy was exhaustively fulfilled in only a handful of individuals whose gifting functioned in an exclusively foundational, initiatory and therefore temporary fashion. Does this theory adequately explain the text? Is the revelatory and charismatic experience of the Spirit foretold by Joel and cited by Peter exhaustively fulfilled in a small minority of believers in a mere 60-year span in only the first century of the church? It seems, rather, that Joel 2 and Acts 2 describe the normative Christian experience for the entire Christian community in the whole of the New Covenant age, called the “last days.”

Cessationism would also require us to believe that a group of anonymous disciples in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7) who prophesied upon their conversion (none of which, be it noted, was ever recorded, nor were these prophets mentioned again) did so with

a view to laying the foundation of the church. It is no less a strain to think that the four daughters of Philip were a part of the once-for-all foundation of the church (Acts 21:9).

A Common Problem

On the cessationist's thesis, all prophetic activity is foundation-laying activity. But if that were the case, it seems unlikely Paul would have spoken of prophecy as a gift bestowed to common people for the "common good" of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:7-10, ESV). Are we to believe Paul exhorted all believers in every church to earnestly desire they exercise foundational significance for the universal church (see 1 Cor. 14:1)? On the contrary, prophecy is to be desired because its purpose is to communicate revelation from God that will encourage those who are discouraged, console those who are disconsolate, and edify those who are weak and untaught (1 Cor. 14:3).

And I must ask: How does the exposure of an unbeliever's secret sins in the churches at Corinth and Thessalonica and Rome and Laodicea and throughout the inhabited earth—sins such as greed, lust, anger, selfishness and more—function in laying the once-for-all foundation of the universal church of Jesus Christ? Yet this is one of the primary purposes of the prophetic gift (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

Most cessationists believe tongues is also a revelatory, and therefore prophetic, gift. But if this were true, we would have noncanonical revelation coming to individual Christians for their own personal edification, not to be shared with the church at large in the absence of an interpreter (1 Cor. 14:28). How could such private revelation in any way be conceived as contributing to the once-for-all foundation of the church at large?

Paul anticipated that every time Christians gathered for worship that—at least potentially—each believer would come

with or contribute, among other things, a “revelation” (1 Cor. 14:26). He anticipated that a normal part of Christian experience was receiving revelatory data or insight from God.

It is difficult to read his instruction for corporate worship and conclude Paul viewed all revelatory, and thus prophetic, ministry as merely foundational for the universal church. There must have been thousands upon thousands of revelations and prophetic utterances throughout the hundreds of churches over the course of the years between Pentecost and the close of the New Testament canon. Are we to believe this multitude of people and their even greater multitude of prophetic words constituted the once-for-all foundation of the church?

The cessationist seems to believe that once apostles and prophets ceased to function foundationally, they ceased to function altogether, as if the only purpose for apostles and prophets was to lay the foundation of the church. Nowhere does the New Testament say this, least of all in Ephesians 2:20. This text need say no more than that apostles and prophets laid the foundation once and for all and then ceased to function in *that capacity*. But nothing suggests they ceased to function in other capacities, much less that they ceased to exist altogether. Certainly it is true that only apostles and prophets lay the foundation of the church, but it is anything but certain that such is the *only* thing they do.

Let All Prophecy

In a word, the portrayal in Acts and 1 Corinthians of who could prophecy and how it was to be exercised in the life of the church simply does not fit with the cessationist’s assertion that Ephesians 2:20 describes all possible prophets, every one of whom functioned as part of the once-for-all foundation of the church. Rather, Paul is there describing a limited group of prophets who were closely connected to the apostles, both groups of which spoke Scripture-quality words essential to the foundation of the church universal.

I can only conclude that nothing in Ephesians 2:20—or any other biblical text—suggests, much less requires, that we believe the gift of prophecy ceased following the foundational period of New Testament church life. That is one reason, among numerous others, why I am a charismatic.

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