

How You Can Unwrap the Gifts of the Spirit

From the sawdust-covered tent floors of healing evangelists to the simple but radically profound services held at Azusa Street, the Pentecostal-charismatic movement continues to grow in size, impact, influence and significance. Wherever its message has traveled, believers have seen and experienced miracles, signs, wonders and healings as God has confirmed the word with supernatural activity and answered prayer.

Yet in a significant portion of the body of Christ, we find those who remain adamant that God has ceased the operation of multiple spiritual gifts recorded in the New Testament. This theology is known as cessationism.

The cessationist doctrine teaches that certain gifts of the Spirit—miracles, healings, tongues, interpretation of tongues and prophecy—ceased with the death of the apostles, their immediate successors or the canonization of the New Testament. Cessationists also teach that some of the ministry gifts of Ephesians 4:11-12—apostles, prophets and evangelists—also ceased. This was John Calvin’s position. Much of the Protestant church, however, later added the evangelist to the pastor and teacher as a continuing gift for the church.

‘The Perfect’

The primary Scriptures cessationists use to make their case are 1 Corinthians 13:8-12, Hebrews 2:3-4 and 2 Corinthians 12:12. After considering these passages and proving from context that they do not support cessationism, we will address other passages that refute this doctrine.

“Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for knowledge it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will

pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:8-12, ESV).

Verse 8 states prophecies will pass away, tongues will cease and knowledge will also pass away. Verse 10 gives the timing of the aforementioned gifts to end—when the perfect comes. The cessationist argument claims "the perfect" refers to the New Testament. However, most commentators—even most evangelical commentators—understand the phrase to mean the return of Jesus, not the canonization of the New Testament.

One of the primary principles of biblical interpretation is to examine the meaning the text would have had for its original audience. Since the New Testament was not canonized until A.D. 393 and 397, the more natural interpretation of "the perfect" would be the Second Coming of Jesus. The context of this passage predates the canonization of the New Testament by approximately 363 years.

Near the decline of one the earliest heresies, Montanism, which originated sometime between A.D. 136-177, the Montanists moved from emphasizing the gift of prophecy to teaching that this gift would end. The early church responded to the teaching of the cessation of prophecy upon the death of the Montanists' key leaders by using 1 Corinthians 13:8-12, interpreting "the perfect" as referring to the Second Coming of Jesus. The gifts would end, but not until the Second Coming.

Finally, the cessationist interpretation of this passage would require knowledge to pass away in the same way and time as prophecy. I am not aware of any cessationist teaching that believes knowledge has passed away with the canonization of the New Testament.

‘Those Who Heard Him’

A second passage used by cessationists is Hebrews 2:3b-4 (NIV): “This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”

Cessationists interpret this passage to mean the apostles were “those who heard him.” However, God is not said to testify or confirm the messengers, but the message of the gospel instead: “God also testified to it by signs, wonders, and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.” He did this whether apostles, deacons or mere disciples were used to confirm the message. Mark 16:20 reveals a parallel to God confirming His word: the preaching of the gospel by signs and wonders.

‘Signs and Wonders and Mighty Works’

Cessationists use a third passage to prove their doctrine: 2 Corinthians 12:12 (ESV). “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.”

This first reference to signs includes the list of sufferings Paul had endured in preaching the gospel of the kingdom mentioned in 11:23-28. The second sign would be Paul’s character, and the third category would include signs, wonders and miracles. This passage does not say only apostles experience signs, wonders and miracles, but that they experience them along with others in the body of Christ. Acts 4:33 (ESV) also points to those other than only the apostles: “And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” And in Acts 5:12a, we see again that these supernatural signs extend beyond the apostles alone: “Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles.”

Thus the argument that signs, wonders and miracles or mighty deeds operated only through the apostles or persons the apostles had laid their hands upon is clearly in error, because the New Testament reveals no such limitation. Jesus declares this in John's Gospel: "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12, NIV).

John 3:16,18, 36 make it clear that these three references to "whoever believes" pertain to salvation and are not limited to the apostles. John 6:35 and 7:38 both carry the implication that "whoever believes" refers to salvation. Though not stated as clearly as in John 3, the context indicates that the meaning pertains to the benefits of salvation and life in the kingdom.

John 12:44-50 also refers to salvation, as verse 50 clearly states: "I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say." This should reveal that the "whoever believes" of John 14:12 who will "do the works [Jesus had] been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because [I am going] to the Father" is not limited to the apostles, but to anyone who believes. Those who believe receive salvation and will receive the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39), the one who will enable them to exercise the charismata (gifts of the Spirit) Jesus pours out upon them.

Acts 6 shows the apostles becoming bogged down in administrative work related to the ministry to the poor. They tell the church to choose seven men known to be "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (v. 3b, NKJV). The apostles turn this administrative service to the poor over to these seven, laying their hands upon them and setting them apart as servants—deacons. Of these seven, two became well known in the church for operating in wonders and miraculous signs. "Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great

wonders and miraculous signs among the people” (v. 8, NET).

Philip was also one of the seven; he went to Samaria after Steven was martyred and the church scattered, leaving only the apostles in Jerusalem. “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed” (Acts 8:5-7, ESV).

In this same revival in Samaria, Simon, a former sorcerer, was saved. “Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip; and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed” (Acts 8:13, NASB 1995).

Both Steven and Philip had hands laid on them by the apostles. Yet neither is ever called an apostle, revealing that in the New Testament church, signs and wonders also happened through deacons. The book of Acts does not limit the miraculous power to the apostles or to those upon whom they laid their hands.

‘The Lord’s Hand Was With Them’

Acts 11:19 and following picks up the story from Acts 8:1-4; the church had been scattered and “preached the word wherever they went” (8:4b, NIV). Acts 11:21 uses a Hebrew idiom to indicate that the power of God rested upon the disciples as they were preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus: “the Lord’s hand was with them.” This phrase is used 36 times in the Old Testament and three times in the New Testament.

The disciples who took the gospel to Antioch, none of whom were apostles, were all Jewish believers at this time. Acts 11:20-21 says, “Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s

hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” This verse makes the clear connection between “the hand of the Lord was with them” and the great number of people who believed and turned to the Lord.

Just a few verses later, we see another Jewish idiom. The church in Jerusalem heard about the church plant occurring in Antioch and sent Barnabas to check it out. “When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (Acts 11:23, NIV). There is no evidence that these scattered Christians who were experiencing the “hand of the Lord [being] with them” and “what the grace of God had done” were only the other five deacons. Instead, they are men from Cyrene and Cyprus who went to Antioch. Both the hand of the Lord and evidence of the grace of God would imply power, signs, wonders and miracles. These expressions would all flow from the charismata of the Holy Spirit, the gifts. These charismata were not the exclusive domain of the apostles; 1 Corinthians 12:28-31 makes this clear, as do other New Testament passages.

Other New Testament passages also display God using non-apostles to accomplish His supernatural work:

“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:4-8, ESV).

As we have already seen, 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 also speaks of the gifts continuing until the return of Christ.

“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ

apportioned it. This is why it says, 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to his people' (Eph. 4:7-8).

"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13, NIV).

Additional New Testament passages that indicate the gifts operated in those beyond the apostles are: Romans 12:3-8, Galatians 3:5, Ephesians 3:20-21, 1 Thessalonians 1:5-8, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, 1 Peter 4:7-12.

Other translations render the Greek for "works of service" as "work of ministry." It is also important to note that the comma between "equip his people" and "for works of service" has been removed in most translations of the modern era, preventing readers from seeing the function of the fivefold offices: to "equip his people," "for works of service," "to build up the body of Christ." With the removal of the comma, the purpose of the fivefold offices is to "equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until ..."

The "until" gives us the duration of the fivefold offices. Until Jesus returns, the function is to continue, and if the function is to continue, so are all the offices or ministries needed to bring about those functions. The operation of the gifts of the Spirit serves as the means of accomplishing the goals of verse 13. And the domain—"gifts" in the latter part of verse 8 and listed in verse 11 as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers—are the ones through whom God imparts, activates, coaches, trains, teaches and equips the saints for the work of ministry.

The ministry of the fivefold is to prepare the members of the body of Christ to minister in the gifts and callings God has given them. Again, as in all of the references in this section, the ministry gifts are to continue operating until the Second Coming of Jesus.

Wonder-Working Power

In Paul's second letter to the Thessalonian church he states, "With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:11-12, NIV). Notice he prays God would, by His power, "fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith." And why does he pray this? We find the answer in verse 12: "That the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him."

Let us remember that the primary way God glorifies his name is through His power. We see this clearly in the Upper Room discourse of John 14-16 and in John 2:11, where Jesus revealed His glory by turning the water into wine. Paul, like John, will use glory and power as synonyms for each other, sometimes saying, "raised by the power of God" and other times "raised by the glory of God." The acts prompted by faith are most probably acts that would require God's supernatural power in and through His charismata.

The acts prompted by faith may not involve healings, miracles or deliverance, but they can still bring about occurrences outside the natural realm of things. In the 19th and early 20th century, George Mueller's prayer-driven care for orphans, and in the late 20th and early 21st century, Rolland and Heidi Baker's by-faith feeding of 5,000-10,000 children a day through Iris Global both demonstrate the gift of faith. The

way Mike and Deena Van't Hul and their three children followed God's call to China also reveals the power of faith expressed through works of service. Their ministry, Loaves & Fishes International, depends upon God supernaturally supplying the money to build several buildings, purchase land and care for hundreds of children abandoned in state orphanages due to their severe birth defects.

Some denominations believe in healing through prayer while denying gifts of healings and working of miracles, often restricting this type of healing to the elders of the church (see James 5:14-15). Though practicing this scriptural command deserves commendation, we need not abandon the reality of the power of the Spirit as described in the New Testament. The church of Jesus Christ has been and always will be supernatural in nature. There is no biblical evidence to support modern believers subscribing to a theology that relegates the miraculous power of God to an earlier era. We must believe God for a fresh release of His wonder-working power.

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An international itinerant minister birthed from a four-day meeting in Canada, **Randy Clark** illustrates the aphorism, "don't despise small beginnings." With more than 30 years of pastoral experience and 44 years of ministry, he has traveled to over 50 countries and continues to travel to fulfill God's mandate on his life.

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