

God Didn't Shut Off the Power of Pentecost

I was raised a Southern Baptist, and then at age 18 I had a Pentecostal experience while I was still a Baptist. People jokingly refer to me now as a "Bapticostal" because they consider this to be a strange combination of doctrines. That's because many Baptists are cessationists. They believe the gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased operating after the New Testament apostles died.

As a teenager I didn't see any inconsistency in being a Baptist and a Pentecostal. Baptist pastors always told me: "If it's in the Bible, you should believe it." I valued God's Word, and God's Word taught me about the Holy Spirit and His gifts. I wanted everything God promised in His Word!

When I learned that I could be baptized in the Holy Spirit and experience the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12, I wanted this. Since that day I've regularly experienced the Spirit's gifts in my life, resulting in many changed lives. My Pentecostal experience eventually propelled me into traveling ministry, and I've now preached in 39 countries because of the miraculous empowerment I received in 1976.

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Today I still encounter cessationists who insist that God doesn't work miracles anymore. They believe that after the Bible was canonized we didn't need visions, healing, prophecy, speaking in tongues or deliverance from demons. They insist that God flipped a switch and turned off the power Jesus promised His first disciples. Some cessationists go so far as to say that God doesn't speak to His people in a personal way anymore—except through the pages of the Bible.

I consider my cessationist brethren a part of my spiritual family because they believe Jesus is the Son of God. I love them dearly. We will spend eternity in heaven together. But I can't agree with the cessationist position, and I think it has hindered the cause of Christ by dampening people's faith in what God can do. Here are three reasons cessationism is a harmful doctrine:

1. Jesus never said He was going to shut down the flow of His power. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His followers that they would "be clothed with power from on high" after they waited in Jerusalem for the experience of Pentecost (see Luke 24:49b, NASB). He also declared that miraculous signs and wonders would accompany those who believed in Him (see Mark 16:17), and He didn't give a cut-off date for those miracles.

The early disciples experienced all the miracles Jesus promised, including healings, visions, angelic protection, speaking in tongues, prophecies and deliverance from demons. And nowhere did the writers of New Testament epistles say these miracles would end with them. Peter and John experienced the flame of Pentecost and wrote about the Spirit's power (1 Pet. 1:12, 1 John 2:20). Paul spoke in tongues often, and he encouraged Christians to "desire earnestly spiritual gifts" (see 1 Cor. 14:1b). James encouraged the church to anoint sick people with oil and to pray for healing (James 5:14). And the second and third generation of Christian leaders mentioned in the book of Acts experienced miracles, including Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, the prophet Agabus and the daughters of Philip, among others. The Holy Spirit's power continued.

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2. The original proponents of cessationism were skeptical of miracles. One of the chief proponents of early cessationism

was B. B. Warfield, a Presbyterian theologian who served as president of Princeton Seminary from 1886 to 1902. While Warfield opposed the theological liberals of his day who didn't believe in the supernatural inspiration of Scripture, he was highly skeptical of revivalism, and he discounted supernatural experiences. He even taught that the James 5:14 passage about anointing with oil was an instruction to use oil as medicine.

In Warfield's time, many Christian leaders frowned on any form of emotionalism or revival fervor because they felt it was anti-intellectual. They wanted their faith to be by the book, with no messy supernatural element. They were also skeptical of miracles because some Roman Catholics claimed to see visions or experience healings—so all charismatic experiences were labeled heretical. Unfortunately, this anti-supernatural attitude made churches dry, formalistic and closed to the Holy Spirit's life-giving work of renewal.

3. The record of church history doesn't support cessationism.

The church has had its ups and downs, with periods of revival as well as decline. But the record shows that miracles have always accompanied the spreading of the gospel. Any study of foreign missions will prove that the same miracles the apostles did in the first century continue today. In fact, Jesus promised that His followers would do greater works than He did (see John 14:12). The blind still see, the lame still walk, lepers are still being cleansed and demons are still being cast out. Even in this very hour Iranian Muslims are finding Jesus because of miraculous dreams and visions!

Paul warned Timothy that in the last days, men would adhere "to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power" (2 Tim. 3:5a). Don't cling to an old, dry doctrine that questions whether the book of Acts is for today. As we celebrate Pentecost this month on May 19, I pray you will fully embrace the Holy Spirit's power and earnestly desire His miraculous gifts.

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