

The Case against Cessationism

This appendix summarizes and responds to the 10 main arguments for the doctrine of cessation (the doctrine that the gifts of the Spirit, miracles and hearing God's voice ended when the New Testament was completed). This appendix was written by Doug Bannister founder of Fellowship Evangelical Free Church (Knoxville, TN), and author of the book, 'Word & Power Church.' We have made only minor changes to it in order to speak more clearly to our church in context.

We at Southland are not cessationists: we believe that God still speaks to people today outside of the Bible (though always consistent with it, and submitted to its authority); we believe that God still does miracles today; we believe that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are still in operation today (ie. tongues, prophecy, etc.); and we believe that all of the offices of the 5-fold ministry, as spelled out in Ephesians 4:11-12, are still functioning today and necessary for the Church to be effective (including the offices of apostle and prophet).

1. Cessation argument #1: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 teaches that the miraculous gifts passed away with the completion of the New Testament.

- **Response:** Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 12-14 to answer questions the Corinthians were having about the use and abuse of spiritual gifts in their fellowship. His primary goal was to encourage the Corinthians to love one another. Chapter 13:8-13 is to show that love is greater than any gift: *Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned as a child. When I became a man I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall I know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three main: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*
 - a. The miraculous gifts such as tongues and prophecy will cease. But when? "When perfection comes." When perfection comes, these imperfect gifts will pass away. To what is Paul referring when he looks to the coming of "perfection"? There are basically two ways scholars have interpreted this passage.
 - 1) Cessationists argue that "perfection" refers to the completed canon of Scripture. They hold that the first-century church needed these miraculous revelatory gifts because the Bible was not yet complete, and when God completed the scriptural canon, these gifts were no longer needed and passed away.
 - 2) Noncessationists believe that "perfection" refers to the second coming of Christ. They hold that these gifts are intended for the present church age but will not longer be needed when Jesus Christ returns. The majority of biblical interpreters have concluded that "perfection" refers to the second coming of Christ and not the completion of the canon. How have they reached this conclusion?
 - b. **Which is right?** Paul says that when the perfect comes, we will see God "face to face." The phrase "face to face" is used in the Old Testament to mean seeing God personally. Revelation 22:4 says that in heaven, "They will see his face." The Scriptures reveal much about God, but they do not allow for a *face-to-face* meeting with him. This will come when Christ returns.
 - c. Paul says that, for us, when perfection comes, "I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." The Scriptures help us know many things, but it could not be said that we know God *fully* because of them. God will be known fully to his people when his Son returns. Lloyd-Jones rejects the view that the word *perfect* refers to the closed canon:
[Do] you see what that involves? It means that you and I who have the Scriptures open before us, know much more than the apostle Paul of God's truth...if that argument is correct. It means that we are altogether superior to the early church and even to the apostles themselves, including the apostle Paul!...The "then" is the glory everlasting. It is only then that I shall know, even as also I am known; for then I shall see Him as He is.

- d. It is doubtful that when the Corinthians read this letter, the concept of a closed canon would have occurred to them. A far more common theme in Scripture is the return of Christ. When Paul pointed his Corinthian readers to a future day when they would see Christ face to face, they are far more likely to have thought of Christ's return.
- e. For these reasons, and many others treated in the scholarly literature, the most reasonable interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 says that Paul is teaching that the gifts will cease when Jesus Christ returns. Lloyd-Jones concludes his summary of the cessation arguments with typical bluntness:

Let me begin to answer by giving you just one thought...The Scriptures never anywhere say that these things were only temporary – never! There is no such statement anywhere...So you see the difficulties men land themselves in when they dislike something and cannot fully understand it and try to explain it away. All things must be judged in the light of Scriptures, and we must not twist them to suit our theory or argument.

2. Cessation argument #2: The miraculous gifts ceased with the death of the last apostle. B.B. Warfield, a professor at Princeton Seminary, wrote a book in 1918 called *Counterfeit Miracles*, which is still the classic statement of the position that the miraculous spiritual gifts were given only to the apostles and Stephen and Philip. Warfield taught that the purpose of these gifts was to authenticate the apostles as trustworthy bearers of doctrine; when they died, this authenticating power died with them. Most of the contemporary works written from the cessationist camp are, in effect, a footnote to Warfield's work. Warfield wrote:

It is very clear from the record of the New Testament that the extraordinary charismata were not (after the very first days of the church) the possession of all Christians, but supernatural gifts to the few. These gifts were not the possession of the primitive Christian as such: nor for that matter of the Apostolic Church, or the Apostolic age for themselves; they were distinctly for the authentication of the Apostles. They were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the Church. Their function thus confined them to distinctively the Apostolic Church, and they necessarily passed away with it.

- a. The primary texts used by cessationists to support the claim that miraculous gifts were the sole property of the apostles include these:
 - ◇ *The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. – Acts 5:12 (NIV)*
 - ◇ *The things that mark an apostle--signs, wonders and miracles--were done among you with great perseverance. – 2 Cor 12:12 (NIV)*
 - ◇ *This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴ God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. – Heb 2:3-4 (NIV)*
- b. Warfield is correct in affirming the uniqueness of the apostolic office. The twelve apostles certainly enjoyed a unique wonder-working power. The major problem with Warfield's argument, however, is that its conclusion does not follow from its premises. The argument can be broken down into a syllogism.
 - 1) *Major premise:* The apostles, as the foundation of the church, experienced unique wonder-working powers to authenticate their ministry.
 - 2) *Minor premise:* The apostles are dead.
 - 3) *Conclusion:* No one experiences wonder-working power in ministry today.
- c. The conclusion does not follow from the minor premise. While it is true that the apostles had unique miraculous powers and it is true that they are dead, it does not logically follow that no other Christians can experience the miraculous gifts. Jack Deere points out how flawed this reasoning is when he applies it to church planting. We could say:
 - 1) *Major premise:* Only the apostles planted churches in Acts.

- 2) *Minor premise*: The apostles are dead.
 - 3) *Conclusion*: No one should plant churches today.
- d. All that is needed to refute this view from a scriptural standpoint is to find any examples of nonapostolic Christians using the miraculous gifts in the New Testament. Consider these:
- 1) Mark 9:38-39: An unknown man casts out demons in Jesus' name.
 - 2) Luke 10:9: Jesus commissions seventy-two disciples to preach and to heal.
 - 3) Acts 9:17-18: Ananias heals Paul.
 - 4) Romans 12:6: Paul refers to the gift of prophecy in Rome, a church not yet visited by an apostle.
 - 5) 1 Corinthians 12:8-10: Gifts of healing and miracles are experienced in the Corinthian church without an apostle present.
 - 6) Galatians 3:5: Paul refers to the Holy Spirit who "work[s] miracles among you." The "you" is plural and must refer to the entire congregation, which was not led by an apostle.
 - 7) 1 Thessalonians 5:20: Paul demands that the Thessalonians not hinder the prophetic gift.
 - 8) The list of miraculous gifts experienced by nonapostles in the New Testament grows much longer when we include tongues.
- e. Even a progressive dispensationalist like Dr. Robert Saucy of Talbot School of Theology, who stresses in his writings the uniqueness of the apostolic era, challenges cessationist logic at this point:
- While agreeing with many of the emphases in the cessationist position, some of the conclusions that demand the complete cessation of miraculous gifts in my opinion go beyond the express teaching of Scripture or necessary deductions from theological principles of Scripture.*
- f. **Conclusion**: While the unique ministry of the apostles is honored and revered, it cannot be inferred from that ministry that the miraculous gifts were limited to and died with them.

3. Cessation Argument #3: Allowing miraculous gifts such as prophecy undermines the sufficiency of Scripture. This argument is concerned with protecting the Scriptures as the final and authoritative revelation of God's inerrant Word. John MacArthur makes this argument at the beginning of his case against the charismatics, with the question, "Is the Bible still being written?"

Christians on both sides of the Charismatic fence must realize a vital truth: God's revelation is finished for now....God's Word is complete. Jude encompasses the entire New Testament when he writes: "Once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3)...God worked through a certain historical process to establish the authentic of the canon so we might have a clear standard. If we now throw out that historical process and redefine inspiration and revelation, we undermine the uniqueness of the Bible, we will have no way of distinguishing God's voice from man's voice. Eventually anyone can say anything and claim it is God's Word, and no one will have the right to refute it.

- a. MacArthur's concern is well-founded. The history of the church records numerous spurious groups that plunged into heresy when they became unanchored from Scripture and began "hearing God." He also levels fair criticism at a charismatic movement that, in practice, too often seems to equate a "word from God" with scriptural authority. Furthermore, Noncessationists agree that the Scriptures are fully sufficient and that there is no new authoritative revelation being given today.
 - ◇ This argument would be true if the New Testament gift of prophecy were like Old Testament prophecy in its authority. If Paul intended to teach in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 that some in the body would have gifts to speak for God just as authoritatively as Isaiah or Jeremiah did, then we would agree that those gifts have passed away. God is not writing new Scripture today.

- ◇ But as we have seen, New Testament prophecy is not equal to Scripture in authority, and no responsible noncessationist claims that contemporary prophetic gifts have such authority. George Mallone writes, “To my knowledge no noncessationist in the mainstream of Christianity claims that revelation today is equal with Scripture.
- b. MacArthur has too narrowly defined the word *revelation (apokalypsis)* as always referring to scriptural revelation, when in fact it does not. Describing a Corinthians church service, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:26, “When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” Clearly, Paul did not mean that people were speaking with Old Testament authority! If so, why did Paul demand that the revelations be tested by the assembly (1 Cor 14:29)?
- c. In the New Testament, the word *reveal* is not always used in reference to Scripture. It can simply mean “divinely prompted guidance or direction.” Some quick examples:
 - 1) Paul says that “God will make clear” to the Philippians the nature of their attitude (Phil. 3:15).
 - 2) Paul prays for the Ephesians “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better” (Eph. 1:17).
 - 3) Neither is the word *apokalypsis* confined in Paul’s writings to the foundational message of salvation in Christ. In Galatians 2:2 Paul reports that he traveled to Jerusalem to the Apostolic Council on the basis of a revelation. Paul obviously believed that such revelations could be shared by other Spirit-filled Christians; this is the explanation of Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 1:17 that God might give the Ephesians “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation.”
- d. Pressing MacArthur’s arguments to their logical conclusion, one would have to do away with the illuminating, guiding ministry of the Holy Spirit altogether, for these would compromise the sufficiency of Scripture. Yet it is widely agreed that the possibility of being guided by God in prayer does not compromise Scripture, for it is an entirely different type of revelation altogether.

4. Cessation argument #4: Church history proves that all evidence of the miraculous gifts passed away after the first century. This argument filled the bulk of Warfield’s pages and has been popular in cessationist writing ever since. Two responses are in order.

- a. First, even it could be proved that the gifts passed away in the history of the church, this does not prove that God will not grant them again.
- b. Second, history does not prove that the miraculous gifts passed away, as we will see below.
 - 1) Stanley Burgess has produced a three-volume study on the history of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. He writes, “Before John Chrysostom (A.D. 347-407) in the East and Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430) in the west, no church father suggested that any or all of the charismata were intended only for the first-century Church.
 - 2) *The Patristic Era* (A.D. 100-600).
 - a) An early second-century document, *The Didache*, was written to ministers. It exhorted the church to “permit the prophets to give thanks as much as they desire” and then proceeded to give instruction on how prophetic utterances were to be tested.
 - b) Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 100-165) reminds fellow Christians in a letter that “many of our Christian men...have healed and do heal, rendering helpless and driving the possessing devils out.
 - c) Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 130-202) writes,

We do also hear many brethren in the Church who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men...those who are in truth His disciples...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...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.

- d) Origen, writing in the third century, reported that signs and wonders validated the proclamation of the gospel:

The Gospel has a demonstration of its own...this...method is called by the apostle the "manifestation of the Spirit and of power:" of "the Spirit" on account of the prophecies, which are sufficient to produce faith in anyone who reads them...and of "power", because of the signs and wonders.

- e) The Latin theologian Hilary of Poitiers, writing in the fourth century, affirmed that the miraculous gifts were operating in his day:

The gift of the Spirit is manifest...where there is...the gift of healings, that by the cure of the disease we should bear witness to His grace...or by the working of miracles...or by prophecy...or by discerning of spirits...or by kinds of tongues, that the speaking in tongues may be bestowed as a sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit; or by the interpretation of tongues.

- f) Finally, Augustine, who wrote in the late fourth and early fifth century, believed that the gift of tongues was not given to the church in his day, but that the gift of miracles was. In a fascinating chapter in *The City of God*, Augustine writes of numerous healings, exorcisms, and visions and says, regarding his own congregation,

...many miracles were wrought, the same God who wrought those we read of still performing them...One miracle was wrought among ourselves...I suppose there is no inhabitant of Hippo who did not either see or hear of it...There were seven brothers and three sisters...all of them seized with a hideous shaking of their limbs...Two of them came to Hippo...They came daily to the church, and specially to the relics of the most glorious Stephen praying that God might now be appeased, and restore their former health..Easter arrived, and on the Lord's day...the young man was holding the bars of the holy place where the relics were, and praying suddenly he fell down, and lay precisely as if asleep, but not trembling as he was wont to do even in sleep. All present were astonished...And behold! He rose up, and trembled no more, for he was healed.

3) *The Medieval Era (600-1500).*

- a) Colette of Corbi (d.1447) founded a convent and earned a reputation as one through whom God worked in miraculous ways. The Lives of the Saints tells us that the Duchess of Bourbon believed that she resuscitated the dead and comments that "...the fame of the miracles and labours of the carpenter's daughter was in every mouth.
- b) The lives of the saints are filled with stories of the miraculous. Modern-day Protestant scholarship tends to discredit these accounts as legends, but this reactionary approach to church history betrays modernist presuppositions about what sorts of things could and could not have happened in a saint's life. One other example of the presence of gifts during this period is the Scholastic mystical theologian Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202), who wrote in his theology of the Holy Spirit that the Spirit spoke through prophets and that the gift of tongues is imparted by the Holy Spirit by means of the imposition of hands.

- 4) *The Reformation and the Modern Era (1500 to present).* It is widely reported that the Reformers did not believe in the miraculous gifts. The Roman Catholic Church buttressed their authority on claims of miracles, many of which the Reformers questioned.

- a) Therefore it is somewhat surprising to find Martin Luther writing the following advice to a pastor who sought his counsel in ministering to a sick man:

I know of no worldly advice to give. If the physicians are at a loss to find a remedy, you may be sure that it is not a case of ordinary melancholy. It must, rather, be an affliction that comes from the devil and must be counteracted by the power of Christ and the prayer of faith. Accordingly you should proceed as follows...Graciously deign to free this man from all evil, and bring to naught the work that Satan has done in him...Then, when you depart, lay your hands on the man again and say, "These signs shall follow them that believe; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover.

- b) In this century, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones helped to foster a renewed interest in Reformation theology in general and the Puritan way of thought in particular. He writes:

There is evidence from many of those Protestant Reformers and Fathers, that some of them had a genuine, true gift of prophecy...read these books...you will find this gift of prophecy...[and] the occasional miracle. Anyone who is prepared to say that all this ended with the apostolic age, and that there has never been a miracle since the apostles...gives the lie...[and] is to quench the Holy Spirit.

- c. **Conclusion:** It is probably fair to say that the charismatic church has seen too much of the miraculous in the history of the church, and evangelical church has seen too little (There is no entry under "miracle" in the subject index of Philip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church*). As is so often the case, the truth appears to be somewhere in the middle. God has continued to give the miraculous gifts throughout the history of the church, although in varying degrees. There is a growing scholarly literature developing supporting this conclusion.

5. Cessation Argument #5: The miraculous gifts were given only during the three periods of history when new revelation was given. Therefore, they are not being given today.

- a. John MacArthur teaches this view:

Most biblical miracles happened in three relatively brief periods of Bible history: in the days of Moses and Joshua, during the miracles of Elijah and Elisha, and in the time of Christ and the apostles...All three periods of miracles were given in times when God gave his written revelation-Scripture, in substantial quantities.

- b. The major problem with this argument is that a great number of supernatural events occur outside of these three periods. What is more, even if it is shown that the miraculous decreased at certain times, there may be other reasons for the decline, such as rebellion and sin. Samuel Storms makes a telling criticism of this argument:

At most this might suggest that in three periods of redemptive history, miraculous phenomena were more prevalent than at other times. This fact does not prove that miraculous phenomena in other times were nonexistent, nor does it prove that an increase in miraculous phenomena could not appear in subsequent phases of redemptive history.

- c. Note how far removed from specific Scripture texts the debate has become at this point. The doctrine of cessationism hangs on the slender threads of deductive reasoning. There are simply no supporting texts.

6. Cessation Argument #6: Jesus says, “A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign” (Matt. 16:4).

This means that we should not pray for the miraculous in our ministries today.

- a. The problem with this objection is that it fails to consider who Jesus’ audience was. Matthew 16 shows us that the “wicked and adulterous generation” referred to were the Scribes and the Pharisees who came to test Jesus by asking for a sign. Jesus was rebuking hard-hearted unbelievers who mocked him with this request. Notice the greater frequency with which Jesus compassionately responded to a request for a miracle.
- b. Significantly, Acts 4:30 relates that the apostles and the early disciples prayed for signs and wonders to follow their preaching ministry. Paul, rather than discouraging his readers from seeking the miraculous gifts, told them to desire them eagerly (1 Cor. 14:1). John writes that “many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name” (John 2:23). Then he reinforces the positive role of signs in proclaiming the gospel: “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:30-31).

7. Cessation Argument #7: Seeking miraculous gifts, especially in evangelism, devalues the primacy of the Word of God.

The Bible alone is enough to save.

- a. Yes, the gospel alone is enough to save, for it is the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). Tens of thousands have been saved by the Word preached without any attesting works of power. The gospel has intrinsic power to save. The argument of this book, however, is that in the pluralistic world of today, works of power may help the church reach a culture confused by myriad religious choices. In arguing that the postmodern church will be more effective when the Word goes forth with power, is the Word of God devalued?
- b. No, this is exactly what the apostles themselves expressed. They prayed for God to confirm their gospel with works of power. If signs and wonders did not devalue the Word for the apostles, why would they devalue the Word now?
- c. No one has ever preached the Word more powerfully than the apostles. Yet God chose to confirm his words through them with attesting signs and wonders. The argument is frequently made: “The apostles needed that in the first century. Those gifts passed away because the church didn’t need them anymore.” The suggestion that the church does not need them anymore implies that the apostles needed more help than we do in preaching the gospel! If the apostles, with their tremendous spiritual gifting and ministering to a world that was still filled with eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ, needed the help of signs and wonders, don’t we need them too?

8. Cessation Argument #8: Jesus warns us that in the end times false prophets will work miracles and deceive the elect.

Therefore we should not seek miraculous gifts.

- a. The work of God’s Spirit is always counterfeited by the enemy. The scriptural approach is to learn to discern between true and false prophets. Texts such as Matthew 7:15-17, 2 Peter 2:1-22, and 1 John 4:1-6 guide the church to distinguish the false prophet from the true prophet.
- b. The Bible says there will be false teachers in the end times. Does that mean we should abandon the gift of teaching for fear of being deceived? Jesus did warn his followers to beware of deceiving false prophets who teach error and work false miracles. The fact that Satan can counterfeit a true ministry of the Spirit should not result in rejecting that ministry of the Spirit.

9. Cessation Argument #9: The epistles rarely speak of the miraculous gifts. This proves that these gifts passed away toward the end of the first century.

- a. The line of this argument says that the gifts are not discussed much in the epistles and that, in the letters written toward the end of Paul's life, we do not find Epaphroditus, Timothy, or Trophimus being supernaturally healed.
- b. This is an argument from silence, which is the weakest kind. Paul does not speak about his gift of celibacy in the later epistles either. Is one therefore to assume that he lost it? Not much can be proved from silence. The epistles do refer to the miraculous gifts in Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Galatians 3:5, Ephesians 4:1-16, and 1 Thessalonians 5:20. Moreover, there is no explicit command in the epistles to evangelize. Should one conclude that by the end of the century the apostles had stopped witnessing? Just because Paul did not heal the three men he mentions in the prison epistles does not mean he had lost his gift of healing. The Scripture simply does not say why they were not healed.
- c. The greatest problem with this argument, as Jack Deere points out, is that it contrasts narrative literature with didactic literature. The book of Acts is narrative literature. Luke explained that the purpose of the book of Acts was to tell "about all that Jesus began to do and to teach" (Act 1:1). Acts is the story of Jesus' continuing his miraculous ministry through the church. The epistles are letters written to churches dealing with specific problems. When the problems related to gifts, as in Corinth, the epistle addressed it. Otherwise there was no reason for the gifts to be mentioned. Furthermore, Paul was in prison when he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. These letters will obviously not be filled with stories of Paul working miracles-Paul was locked up!

10. Cessation Argument #10: The miracles worked by the apostles were always successful, instantaneous, and on the hardest cases (such as organic illnesses like blindness or paralysis). If Jesus and the apostles were here today, they would be emptying the hospitals. The miracles of today are nothing like the ones in the Bible. This proves that the miraculous gifts have ceased.

- a. It has already been affirmed that Jesus and the apostles ministered with extraordinary power. It does not follow from this that believers today cannot minister with these gifts at all. While present day believers may not witness with that kind of power, they continue to witness. The same is true of these gifts: they may not be used with the power displayed by the apostles, but they are still used.
- b. There does seem to be a distinction between the apostolic gift of healing and the gifts of healing mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. These gifts of healing may be of lesser intensity, which would account for the difference between apostolic and modern miracles. Samuel Storms writes:

It is repeatedly argued that the extent and intensity of apostolic signs, wonders and miracles has not continued unchanged throughout church history. I agree. But this would only prove that the apostles operated at a level of supernatural power unknown to other Christians, something virtually everyone concedes. It has no bearing, however, on the question of whether the miraculous gifts of 1 Corinthians 12:7-10 are designed by God for the church in every age.

