

Cessation vs. Continuance

The Error of Extremes

Throughout the long history of the Christian church one of Satan's most successful tactics has been the use of *extremes*. This is especially true regarding the work of the Holy Spirit. No sooner has one branch of professing Christendom been led into an extreme, unbiblical, or even fanatical position regarding the work of the Holy Spirit, than another branch reacts with an equally extreme and unbiblical opposing position. Needless to say, on both sides the Bible is subjected to the most unnatural and contorted interpretations in order to "prove" these positions, since they have arisen not out of unbiased study of the Scriptures, but in the heat of *reaction* to the abuses of the opposite extreme.

Illustrations abound, both in church history and in our own day. For every charismatic who teaches that *tongues* are "the one true evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit," there is someone from an opposing camp who adamantly maintains that baptism in the Holy Spirit is "always nonexperiential." On the one side are those who gullibly accept every wild claim to the miraculous as a "great work of God," on the other are those who deny present-day miracles entirely. Some see demons in everything; others see them nowhere. Some say that *all* the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit were intended to be operative in *every* local church at *every* period of time since the apostles; others contend that *no* supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit was intended to be operative in *any* local church at *any* period of time since the apostles.

In this scenario, Satan wins both ways. In the one group, the most grotesque and fanatical events are passed off as the work of the Holy Spirit; in the other, men recoil in horror and deny the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit altogether. Either way, the work of the Holy Spirit is partially discredited, and men are tricked into formulating their doctrinal positions *in response to errors* introduced by the devil, not in the terms that the Bible itself sets forth.

With regard to the issue of the continuance or cessation of miracles, miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc., the Scriptures themselves lead us to *neither* of the extreme positions set forth above.

Two general guidelines give the basic framework for a biblical understanding of this issue:

I. A general outpouring, fullness, and manifestation of the Holy Spirit and His gifts characterizes the whole church age from Pentecost to the Second Coming.

- 1. Acts 2:16-21 (Joel 2:28-32)** *"This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,' God says, 'THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT UPON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; EVEN UPON MY*

BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT And they shall prophesy. AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE, AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BENEATH, BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. THE SUN SHALL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS, AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME. AND IT SHALL BE, THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD SHALL BE SAVED. ’’

Here Peter quotes the prophecy of Joel with respect to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that was to characterize the “last days.” It is clear from this passage, as well as many other New Testament Scriptures, that the term “last days” refers to the whole church age. Joel envisions a time period continuing right up to the second coming (“the great and glorious day of the Lord”). This period of time is identical with the period in which “whosoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (v.21)—i.e. the whole church age. Pentecost was thus only the *beginning* of this Scripture’s fulfillment, which promises an outpouring of the Spirit upon “all mankind,” prophesying of “sons and daughters,” visions, dreams, etc.—none of which were fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. A few verses later (v.33, 38-39) Peter again makes it very clear that this promise of Joel extends, not just to first-century Christians, but to Christians of all generations—“all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.”

2. **1 Corinthians 13:8-13** *“Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known. But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”*

Here the apostle Paul specifically teaches that the supernatural gifts of the Spirit will be present in the church *until the second coming of Christ*, when they will then be “done away.” This passage was repeatedly used by the church fathers to prove this very point. The novel idea that the “perfect” which is “coming” refers to “the New Testament canon” is of recent invention and never even occurred to the great commentators of the past, much less to the Apostle Paul or the Corinthians! To any reader who is not trying to prove a point, it is clear that seeing “face to face” refers to personal encounter (**Gen 32:20; Exo 33:11; Num 12:18; Dt 5:4; Jer 32:4; 2 Cor 10:1; 2 John 12; 3 John 14**), and “knowing fully, just as we also have been fully known” refers to something much more glorious than having a “completed canon”! Are we really prepared to say that, compared to us, the *Apostle Paul* only “saw in a mirror dimly” and only “knew in part”?

3. **Ephesians 4:11-13** *“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”*

It is important to notice that in Paul’s thinking, the supernatural gifts are not given by Christ to the church primarily to *accredit the apostles*, but to *“build up the body of Christ.”* These gifts are distributed to “each” (v.7-8) for the building up of the church, *until* “we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God”—the very “measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” It should be obvious that the church has not already attained this perfection, nor will it attain it until Christ returns. In other words, this passage sets forth the same truth as 1 Corinthians 13, that the gifts will function to build up the body of Christ until that day when they are no longer necessary, and the church is presented to Christ, “having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing.” (5:27)

4. **1 Thessalonians 5:16-24** *“Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.”*

Once again in this passage, we see Paul instructing the church with regard to “quenching the Spirit” and “prophetic utterances,” in the very same breath that he assures them concerning the *second coming of Christ!* Clearly there was no thought in his mind that spiritual gifts would cease almost two thousand years before Christ’s return.

5. **1 Corinthians 1:4-9** *“I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

Here, again, Paul’s concept of the supernatural gifting of the church *until the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ* at the second coming is obvious. This, as noted above, is the ongoing characteristic of the church age set forth in Joel’s prophecy.

6. **Mark 16:14-20** “*And afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at the table; and He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it shall not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed.*”

Here the Lord Jesus Christ sets forth the characteristics of the church age. Supernatural “signs” will accompany, not just the apostles, but the New Testament church as a whole—“those who have *believed*” (v.17)—the same people referred to in the preceding verse as “those who have *believed* and been baptized.” (v.16) How long would this situation last? The parallel passage in **Mt 28:18-20** makes it clear: “And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’” From this it is obvious that the great commission (and the promises related to it), though spoken originally to the apostles, is meant to extend to “all the nations” and to continue “even to the end of the age,” not just during the limited ministry and lifetime of the twelve. (When Jesus says, “I am with *you* always, even to the end of the age,” He cannot possibly be referring to the *apostles*, who died at least 2,000 years before the “end of the age.”) Thus, we see the same pattern in the Lord’s teaching as in that of the Apostles Peter and Paul in the passages already cited.

7. **1 Corinthians 12-14 and other passages too numerous to mention.**

It is a *general principle of vast importance* that the *New Testament* was given to the *church* as its *rule of faith and duty*. It was *not* given as a history book to satisfy our curiosity as to how the church *used to function* (**1 Cor 12-14**), or what exhortations Christians *used to have to obey* (**1 Ths 5:19-22; 1 Cor 14:1, 12-13, 39 etc.**), or what demonic opposition believers *used to confront* (**Acts 16:16-17; 8:7; 19:19, etc.**), or what powers Christians *used to have* in confronting that opposition (**Lk 10:17-20; Mt 10:19-20; Acts 16:18; Mk 11:22-24; Mk 16:17-18**). Throughout passages like 1 Corinthians 12-14, which set forth the church under the analogy of “one body with many members,” there is never the slightest hint that some gifts are “continuing” and others are not, or that some are “supernatural” and others are not, or that some are “extraordinary” and others are only “ordinary.” Never is there the slightest hint in these passages that the “sign”

gifts (whatever they are) will pass away with the apostles. Nor is it taught or implied that men need apostles to lay hands on them in order to receive these gifts. In fact, Paul specifically reminds the Galatians that God was “providing them with the Spirit and working miracles among them,” not by the laying on of his hands, but by their “hearing with faith.” (**Gal 3:2, 5**) The same is evident in **Acts 11:15-17**, where God pours out His Spirit independently of Peter, and Peter realizes that he has no right to “stand in God’s way.” Likewise, in **1 Corinthians 14:1, 13** Paul instructs the church to “desire earnestly” and “pray” for spiritual gifts as blessings that could be received directly from God, apart from his own presence or participation.

II. Even though the whole church age is characterized by the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, the profusion and distribution of these gifts rests in the hands of the sovereign Spirit.

- 1. Not “always,” “all the time,” “everywhere.”** It is clear from both the Old and New Testaments that miracles did not occur uniformly throughout the history of the people of God. There are *seasons* of special activity on the part of the Holy Spirit. It was especially fitting that the events surrounding the giving of the Law (including the exodus from Egypt and the revelation on Mt. Sinai) be accompanied with “mighty signs and wonders” and with the “outstretched arm” of God. (**Dt 4:32; Heb 12:18-21**) Likewise, it was especially fitting that the coming into the world of God’s only begotten Son be accompanied by unusual manifestations of Divine power, “both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.” (**Heb 2:4**) As the direct representatives of Christ, the Apostles, in varying degrees, entered into these special manifestations. We are told in **Acts 19:11-12**, for example, that “God was performing *extraordinary* miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.” Likewise, Paul speaks in **2 Corinthians 12:12** of “the signs of a true apostle” that he had performed among the Corinthians “with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.”

At the same time, we need to be careful not to take this argument to an unbiblical extreme, as some have done. Not all of these seasons of special visitation were related to the giving of a new body of revelation. They occurred at other times as well, according to God’s good pleasure, as in the days of Elijah and Elisha. Though Biblical miracles were especially profuse at the time of great revelatory events in Scripture, they were by no means lacking at other times. As **Jeremiah 32:17-21** makes clear, God not only “set signs and wonders in the land of Egypt”, but “*even to this day both in Israel and among mankind*” (**v.20**) He continued to perform the miraculous. The idea that miracles were given primarily to accredit certain men (such as the Apostles) is simply not in line with the Scriptural evidence. As noted above, the various gifts are given “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” Rather than viewing miraculous powers as being limited to a few leaders (such as themselves), men like Moses and Paul desired to see the Spirit of prophecy spread

as broadly as possible amongst the people of God: “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’S people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!” (**Num 11:26-29**) “Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy.” (**1 Cor 14:5**)

Such prophesying in Old Testament times was no threat to the authoritative revelation given once-for-all by God through Moses. Neither was the prophesying at Corinth any threat to the authoritative teaching given through the Apostles. These utterances were never, even in the early church, received as being on par with Scripture, but rather were to be “judged” (**1 Cor 14:29**) and “examined carefully.” (**1 Thes 5:21**) Anything that did not line up with apostolic teaching was to be rejected. (**1 Cor 14:37-38; 1 Tim 6:3-5**) The same was true of “signs and wonders” in the days of Moses. (**Dt 13:1-5**) Thus, the argument that the gifts of the Spirit have ceased because the canon of Scripture is complete (or that a continuing manifestation of the gifts would threaten the authority of Scripture) is not a valid one.

The fact that throughout the Bible the special activity of the Spirit occurs in seasons, coupled with the explicit teaching of 1 Corinthians 12-14 that the gifts of the Spirit are bestowed sovereignly, “just as God desires,” (**12:11, 18**) should keep us from the error of thinking that we are to expect equal manifestations of the Spirit at all times throughout church history. The ability to work miracles was not an automatic possession of either the apostles or the early church. (**Mt 17:19-20**) Even in New Testament times, Christians were *dependent* for their mighty successes upon *repeated* outpourings of the Holy Spirit as God saw fit to grant them. It was only as *God* “extended *His* hand to heal” that “signs and wonders took place in the name of His holy servant Jesus.” (**Acts 4:29-31**) Neither in the early church nor today can men dictate to God when and where He will do His miracles, or what instruments He will use to do them.

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