

What about Miraculous or Sign Gifts?

One Essential Commitment:

To begin, we must keep one thing in mind: This discussion over the continuation or cessation of the “sign gifts” is not fundamental to the Gospel. Solid believers from both camps hold to salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And, at Heritage, it is the elders’ deeply held desire that no division be caused among us because of differences on this subject. Therefore, we must apply the principle given by Paul to the Roman church when Jewish and Gentile believers held disparate views on foods and religious observances (Rom 14:1–15:7). Though, in that case, one group was correct and the other was not, Paul admonished both groups to welcome one another as family, to avoid quarrelling over opinions and passing judgment on each other, and to recognize that both groups strive to honor the Lord based on their current understanding of Scripture.

The Gifts and Today:

Theologian Graham Cole writes: “Are all the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy and tongues, intended for the church today? There are two main views: Cessationist and Continuationist. Both Cessationist and Continuationists are supernaturalists. Their differences lie in differing assessments of the importance for today of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” (Graham A. Cole, “He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit”, Crossway: 2007)

Definitions:

The *Cessationist* position asserts that some of the gifts the Spirit distributed to believers were intended for the foundational era of the Church. After that foundation was laid through the leadership of Christ’s chosen apostles, those foundational gifts, having served their purpose for the entire church age, were no longer normative in the life of the church. Cessationists believe that the other gifts continue to function today. *Continuationists*, on the other hand, believe in the continuation of all the New Testament gifts throughout the Church age.

In addition to these general definitions above, it’s important to note that Christians on both sides of the argument have varied views concerning the details of their positions. Many questions must be considered and answered when studying this topic—and our time doesn’t allow us to do this fully. So, of necessity, we will use broad strokes when attempting to describe each position.

A Case for Cessation of the “Sign” Gifts:

The basic argument for Cessationism begins with an understanding that before the foundation of the Church, miracles are only prevalent in three distinct time-periods: That of Moses, Elijah/Elisha, and Christ. Between these miracle-workers lie centuries where miraculous activity was essentially silent. This suggests that miraculous works serve specific purposes that are not normative for all time periods in the history of God’s people.

Let’s consider some biblical passages for support of this idea:

1 Corinthians 12:28

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. ESV

Notice, the above list of *gifts* includes “apostles” — here used in a technical sense to refer to those personally chosen by Christ. After the death of John, the last living apostle commissioned by Jesus, Christ’s apostles no longer walked the earth. And while the New Testament gives us specific instructions for the qualifications of future elders and deacons in the ongoing life of the Church, it does not include the same for any future apostles. Thus, the gift of apostleship in the passage above is no longer given.

Consequently, most believers, whether cessationist *or* continuationist, believe that the office of apostle has ceased. In that sense most of us, at least on this one point, are cessationists.

In fairness, it must also be said that all Christians are in some sense charismatic because every genuine Christian has been incorporated into the body of Christ and gifted in some way by the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:19–20

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,

Here we see the idea of the Church being built on the foundational work of the apostles and prophets. Both were instrumental in bringing God's revelation to the Church before the Scriptures were completed. These two gifts are designated as foundational. A foundation is usually laid once, not repeatedly.

1 Corinthians 15:7-9

Then [Jesus] appeared to James, then to all the apostles.
Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.
For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Here Paul reminds us that he was the very last apostle to be chosen by Christ.

2 Corinthians 12:12

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. NASB

Here Paul calls "signs and wonders and miracles" the "signs of a true apostle." They pointed to the divine authority working through the apostles who worked these miracles. God used these gifts to authenticate the gospel message the apostles preached.

Hebrews 2:2-4

For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will. NASB

Once again we see that God authenticated the message of the apostles of Christ (those who heard the message personally from Jesus) through signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit..."

Acts 19:11-12

And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,

so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

and then sometime later Paul writes the books of 1 and 2 Timothy where we find the following:

1 Tim 5:23

[Paul instructs Timothy:] No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.

2 Tim 4:20

Erastus remained at Corinth, and I left Trophimus, who was ill, at Miletus.

Why didn't Paul tell Timothy to find someone in the Ephesian church with the gift of healing? Why would Paul not heal Trophimus before he left Miletus? Cessationists see these as indications that the gift of healing was falling out of use by the end of Acts. On the other hand, Continuationists simply see these verses as indicating that the gift of healing is subject to God's will, and not freely dispensed at the whim of the one having the gift. Thus, they see Paul's actions as consistent with a knowledge that God didn't desire to heal them miraculously.

1 Corinthians 13:8–12

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; 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. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

These verses are sandwiched in between Paul's lengthiest teaching on spiritual gifts. They indicate that the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will pass away ... "when the perfect comes." Some cessationists believe this is when the Canon of Scripture was completed. Others see it as the maturity of the Church after the foundational era is complete. On the other hand, Continuationists

understand it to mean when we see Christ “face to face” at His return. And even some cessationists agree with them!

Lastly, cessationists appeal to the preponderance of silence throughout Church history concerning the sign gifts as tacit evidence that they were no longer normative. On the other hand, Continuationists usually see the occasional historical references to the sign gifts in the historical record as proof of their continuing nature.

These are just some of the evidences for the Cessationist position. But, time is limited, so we will press on to consider some evidences for the Continuation of all of the gifts.

Note: Much of the following material is adapted from Robert Saucy, “An Open But Cautious View” in *Are the Miraculous Gifts for Today?: Four Views*, Gundry and Grudem eds., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

The Case for Continuation of All the Gifts:

While the case for Continuation rests on a number of considerations, the argument for the continuance of all the gifts is simpler than that of the Cessationists.

The Continuationist simply parades the various passages delineating the gifts of the Spirit—such as 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30, Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Peter 4:10-11—and then raises two questions: “Where is it stated that God did not intend for these gifts to continue throughout history?” And: “Isn’t it arbitrary to suppose for example that the gift of teaching is still valid but the gift of tongues is not?” But their evidence doesn’t end there.

Let’s consider some passages:

“...you [Corinthians] are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,” 1 Corinthians 1:7.

Continuationists believe that Paul plainly expected the gifts to operate until the return of Christ. Additionally, the larger context of 1 Corinthians 1:4-8 places the Corinthians and the exercise of their gifts in the framework of life between the Cross and the Second Coming of Christ, and not that of the Cross and Canon closure.

1 Corinthians 13:10

but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

Continuationists believe that this verse appears more likely to be a reference to the return of Christ than of the Church's maturity or the completion of Scripture.

The Continuationist case also finds support in references to the gifts of the Spirit as found in the early church writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origin.

Many more evidences can be brought forward, but, once again, time is limited, so we will conclude with this:

Broadly speaking, Continuationists view the Cessationist position as built on unwarranted inference from a cluster of biblical texts that either point in a different direction or are irrelevant to the debate once properly exegeted. Of course, Cessationists would disagree. Truthfully, members of *either* group may be influenced by presuppositions in their interpretation of Scripture.

Before we go on, we should remind ourselves once again about what we began with on page 37: The discussion over the continuation or cessation of the "sign gifts" is not fundamental to the Gospel. It is the elders' deeply held desire that no division be caused among us because of differences on this subject. Each of us are responsible to follow Paul's advice in ***Romans 14:5, 14: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind... let us not pass judgment on one another, any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hinderance in the way of the brother."*** Therefore, we must avoid quarrelling over opinions, and recognize that both groups strive to honor the Lord based on their current understanding of Scripture.

HCF Elders and Miraculous Gifts

At some point, as we continue to study the scripture and seek understanding, with charity and patience, we come very **close to unity** in these matters.

As we come to grasp the different issues, we come to see that we have very **much agreement**, and very few issues or nuances that we disagree about. We then arrive at a very similar place in our understanding, we just **lack a title or label** for such a position. Some have used “modified Continuationist” or “modified Cessationists” holding certain nuances from the more general label of each title.

For purposes of the current state of **unity** among the **elders of Heritage Christian Fellowship**, we elders have used the term **Practical Cessationist** to describe our collective position. By this we mean that although we don't all agree that the Scripture teaches the miraculous gifts have ceased, we do not allow the **practice** of any miraculous gift in our **corporate worship**, or in any small group ministry, as none of us elders see a **modern context** for the use of miraculous gifts in any **corporate worship**.

All of this being said, we certainly all share a concern for the modern church in regard to the **abuse of spiritual gifts**, which we might call Charismania. Which will be addressed at our next class time.