

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Cessationism

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“They worship that way because they don’t have the Holy Spirit.” I frequently heard that statement during my time as a Pentecostal/charismatic Christian years ago whenever we Pentecostals were talking about *non-Pentecostal* believers, particularly those who followed a formal liturgy. We believed that while non-Pentecostals were saved, they lacked the Holy Spirit’s anointing, as evident in their worship style that was outwardly less lively and more structured than ours. Our Pentecostal theology told us that the gifts of tongues and prophecy never ceased, so any group that did not practice these gifts and the typical outward liveliness associated with them lacked the Spirit, or at least the fullness of His presence. In our view, to believe that those gifts had ceased was to believe that the Holy Spirit is not working among His people. We were opposed to cessationism, the doctrine that the spiritual gifts that communicate or confirm divine revelation—particularly the gifts of tongues, miracles, and prophecy—ceased with the death of the last Apostle.

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during biblical times.*

Honestly, much of the blame for connecting the cessationist position with disbelief in the ongoing presence and work of the Spirit lay squarely at my feet and the feet of my Pentecostal friends. We did not study cessationism in detail or talk with the position’s best representatives. Yet, the cessationists were not without fault. All of us knew cessationists who were cessationists merely by custom, not conviction. How is it fair to blame Pentecostal/charismatic Christians for misunderstanding cessationism when the only cessationists they know deny the abiding reality of so-called sign gifts of tongues, miracles, and prophecy more because they are afraid of the unusual than because of a well-developed, biblical argument?

It would take an entire book to present a full case for cessationism, but the essence of the position may be stated briefly. When God delivers new special revelation, He employs extraordinary methods such as prophecy and tongues to deliver that revelation and extraordinary signs such as miracles to confirm those whom we should receive (prophets

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and Apostles) as His inspired deliverers of that revelation. Consequently, when God is not delivering new special revelation, He does not use extraordinary methods and signs; rather, He works in and through the exposition of His special revelation (Scripture) by gifted teachers and duly appointed church elders.

A few biblical evidences for cessationism are worth noting. First, God's people have gone centuries without a prophet at various times in history. For example, God did not speak to His people by prophets—at least by prophets as we normally conceive of them—from Abraham to Moses. Moreover, first-century Jews recognized that the Lord sent no prophets during the four centuries or so between Malachi and John the Baptist. Yet, God was at work in those eras even when there were no prophets.

Second, miracles were not everyday occurrences during biblical times. They happened only when God was giving new revelation to His people that would be written down. Looking at Scripture as a whole, we see three great periods of miracles: during the eras of Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and Jesus and His Apostles. New special revelation from God characterized each period. Moses received the law and was made mediator of the old covenant. Elijah and Elisha represent the formal institution of the prophetic office and the many oracles the prophets would give. Jesus and the Apostles instituted the new covenant and provided instruction necessary for the new covenant era. Given that even biblical miracles were so limited, there is no reason to expect that there will be people in every generation who are gifted to do miracles.

Third, [Hebrews 1:1–4](#) tells us that God's final Word to us is His Son and that His manner of speaking through His Son—and thus through the Apostles who spoke with His authority to the church—is not the same as the various ways He spoke before the coming of Jesus. Given that Jesus is our Prophet and that the first-century Apostles exercised a prophetic ministry, the difference between Jesus and His Apostles and the old covenant prophets is not that Jesus and His Apostles employed new methods in teaching but that they spoke with decisive finality. They laid the foundation of the church ([Eph. 2:18–22](#)), so we do not expect ongoing revelation, for a foundation is laid only once. There is no need for Jesus to offer guidance through prophets and Apostles any longer.

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has not spoken finally in His Son.*

Finally, when we look at the instruction that Jesus and the Apostles give for the post-Apostolic period, we do not find any calls for the church to look for prophets or to expect

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people to do miracles or to search for tongues speakers to give a new message or guidance from the Lord. Especially pertinent here are texts such as Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders in [Acts 20](#) and the final letters written by Apostles before they died, including 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus from Paul and 1, 2, and 3 John from John. What do these texts command the church to do? To hold fast to the tradition—the Apostolic teaching—that the church has already received, not to look for new revelation.

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In light of all this, and given the very high doctrine of Scripture in Reformed theology, it is no wonder that cessationism has been the standard Reformed position. In fact, to believe that the gifts of tongues, prophecies, and miracles have ceased is so wrapped up with the confessional Reformed understanding of the inscripturated Word of God and the declarative power of the post-Apostolic church that it is really impossible both to be Reformed and to believe the aforementioned gifts continue. If divine special revelation has not ended, if prophecy and related gifts continue, we have no choice but to record this revelation and follow it, for God demands that we keep and follow His Word. If divine special revelation has not ended, God has not spoken finally in His Son, and the closed canon of Scripture cannot be our final rule of faith and practice. To combine with Reformed theology the continuationist position that the gifts of prophecy, miracles, and tongues continue is to produce an unstable and irreconcilable mixture of contradictory elements.

But that does not entail that cessationists deny the ongoing presence and work of the Holy Spirit. We cessationists do not believe that the Spirit is unable to speak through prophets today, but only that He has chosen not to. We cessationists believe that the Spirit can and often does heal people in unexpected ways when we pray for them. We believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the sound exposition of His Word. We believe that He opens and closes doors for us and even arranges providential “coincidences” in our lives. In fact, I contend that traditional Reformed cessationism has a higher view of the Spirit's power and freedom than traditional continuationism. This is because we confess that the Spirit must bring dead souls to life in order for us to believe; that He must do so without our asking, for in our spiritually dead state outside of Christ we will not ask for new life; and that He does so for only those whom He freely chooses and at the moment of His own choosing.

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