

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

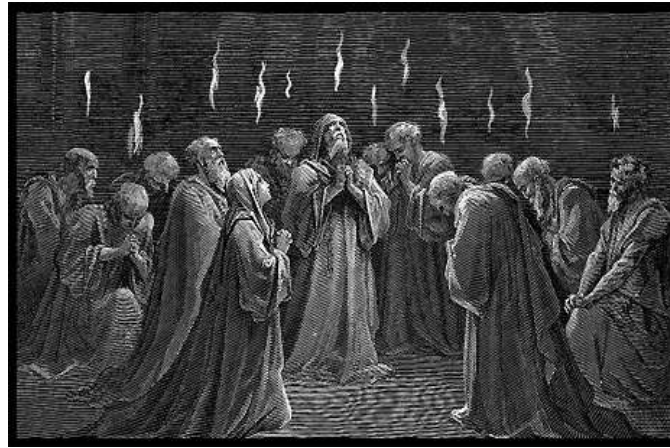
What Cessationism Is Not

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Much ado has been made (both on this blog and elsewhere) about the recent “anti-cessationist” comments of a popular Seattle-based pastor.¹ I don’t desire to enter a war of words, or become embroiled in an online controversy. But I do hope to make a helpful contribution to the conversation.

1

Over the last few years, I’ve enjoyed investigating the historical record regarding the charismatic gifts, especially [the gift of tongues](#). And I can only hope that the above pastor, and his co-author, will treat the material responsibly in their upcoming work on the subject. (Who knows, maybe they’d be open to a two-views book?)



I would also hope that, in the process of critiquing the cessationist position, the authors do not create a straw man version of cessationism. (I’ll admit that, based on what I’ve read so far,² I’m afraid the straw man is already under construction.)

Nonetheless, in an effort to dismantle a fallacious misrepresentation before it is built, I offer the following four clarifications about **what cessationism is not**:

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¹ This is a reference to Mark Driscoll who was at that time pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle (which has since ceased to exist). See also: <https://teampyro.blogspot.com/2011/08/open-letter-to-mark-driscoll.html>

² <https://lionandlambapologetics.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Mark-Driscoll-on-Cessationsim-Talk-Master-Transcript.pdf>

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

1 Cessationism is not anti-supernatural, nor does it deny the possibility of miracles.

When it comes to understanding the cessationist position, the question is not: *Can God still do miracles in the world today?* Cessationists would be quick to acknowledge that God can act at any time in any way He chooses. Along these lines, John MacArthur explains:

*Miracles in the Bible [primarily] occurred in three major periods of time. The time of Moses and Joshua, the time of Elijah and Elisha, and the time of Christ and the apostles. . . . And it is during those three brief periods of time and those alone that miracles proliferated; that miracles were the norm; that miracles were in abundance. Now God can interject Himself into the human stream supernaturally anytime He wants. We're not limiting Him. We're simply saying that He has chosen to limit Himself to a great degree to those three periods of time.*³ ([Source](#))

Cessationism then does not deny the reality that God can do whatever He wants whenever He wants ([Psalm 115:3](#)). It does not put God into a box or limit His sovereign prerogative.

But it does acknowledge that there was something unique and special about the age of miracles and miracle-workers that defined the ministries of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and Christ and His apostles. Moreover, it recognizes the seemingly obvious fact that *those kinds of miracles* (like parting the sea, stopping the rain, raising the dead, walking on water, or instantly healing the lame and the blind) are not occurring today.

Thus, cessationists conclude that:

*The apostolic age was marvelously unique and it ended. And what happened then is not the normal thing for every Christian. The normal thing for every Christian is to study the Word of God, which is able to make us wise and perfect. [It] is to live by faith and not by sight.*⁴ ([Ibid.](#))

But can God still do extraordinary things in the world today? Certainly He can, if He chooses to do so. In fact, every time a sinner's eyes are opened to the gospel, and a new life in Christ is created, it is nothing short of a miracle.

In his helpful book, [To Be Continued?](#), Samuel Waldron aptly expresses the cessationist position this way (on p. 102):

³ http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/1368_Is-This-the-Age-of-Miracles

⁴ [Ibid.](#)

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

I am not denying by all this that there are miracles in the world today in the broader sense of supernatural occurrences and extraordinary providences. I am only saying that there are no miracles in the stricter sense [of] miracle-workers performing miraculous signs to attest the redemptive revelation they bring from God. Though God has never locked Himself out of His world and is still at liberty to do as He pleases, when He pleases, how He pleases, and where He pleases, He has made it clear that the progress of redemptive revelation attested by miraculous signs done by miracle-workers has been brought to conclusion in the revelation embodied in our New Testaments.

3

So, the question is not: *Can God still do miracles?*

Rather, the definitive question is this: *Are the miraculous gifts of the New Testament still in operation in the church today—such that what was the norm in the days of Christ and the apostles ought to be expected today?*

To that, all cessationists would answer “no.”

* * * * *

2 Cessationism is not founded on one’s interpretation of “the perfect” in [1 Corinthians 13:10](#).

For that matter, it seems there are almost as many views of “the perfect” among cessationist scholars as there are commentators who write about [1 Corinthians 13:8–13](#). Space in this article does not permit a full investigation into each of these, but rather a cursory explanation of the major positions.

The Different Views

- (1) Some (such as F.F. Bruce) argue that **love itself** is *the perfect*. Thus when the fullness of love comes, the Corinthians will put away their childish desires.
- (2) Some (such as B.B. Warfield) contend that **the completed canon** of Scripture is *the perfect*. Scripture is described as “perfect” in [James 1:25](#), a text in which the same word for “mirror” (as in v. 12) is found (in [James 1:23](#)). Thus partial revelation is done away when the full revelation of Scripture comes.
- (3) Some (such as Robert Thomas) contend that **the mature church** is *the perfect*. This view is primarily based on the illustration of verse 11 and on the close connection between this passage and [Eph. 4:11–13](#). The exact timing of the church’s “maturity” is unknown, though it is closely associated with the completion of the canon, and the end of the apostolic era (cf. [Eph. 2:20](#)).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

- (4) Some (such as Thomas Edgar) see **the believer's entrance into the presence of Christ** (at the moment of death) as *the perfect*. This view accounts for the personal aspect of Paul's statement in verse 12. Paul personally experienced full knowledge when he entered Christ's presence at his death (cf. [2 Cor. 5:8](#)).
- (5) Some (such as Richard Gaffin) see **the return of Christ** (and the end of this age) as *the perfect*. This is also the view of most continuationists. Thus, when Christ comes back (as delineated in chapter 15), the partial revelation we know now will be made complete.
- (6) Some (such as John MacArthur) view **the eternal state** (in a general sense) as *the perfect*. This explanation interprets the neuter of *to teleion* as a reference to a general state of events and not a personal return of Christ. This view overlaps with both numbers 4 and 5 above in that, according to this view: "For Christians the eternal state begins either at death, when they go to be with the Lord, or at the rapture, when the Lord takes His own to be with Himself" (John MacArthur, *First Corinthians*, p. 366).

Of these views, I personally find the last three more convincing than the first three. This is primarily due (I will confess) to the testimony of church history. Dr. Gary Shogren, after doing an in-depth study of some 169 patristic references to this passage, concludes that the church fathers overwhelmingly saw *the perfect* in terms of something beyond this life (most normally associating it with the return of Christ, or with seeing Christ in heaven). Even John Chrysostom (who was clearly a cessationist) saw it this way. While not authoritative, such historical evidence is difficult to dismiss.

In any case, my point here is simply this: The interpreter can take any of the above positions, and still remain a cessationist. In fact, there are cessationists who hold to each of the positions listed above (as the names I've listed indicate).

Thus, Anthony Thiselton notes in his commentary on this passage: "The one important point to make here is that few or none of the serious 'cessationist' arguments depends on a specific exegesis of [1 Cor 13:8-11](#).... These verses should not be used as a polemic for either side in this debate" (NIGTC, pp. 1063-64).

* * * * *

3 Cessationism is not an attack on the Person or work of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, just the opposite is true. Cessationists are motivated by a desire to see the Holy Spirit glorified. They are concerned that, by redefining the gifts, the continuationist

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

position cheapens the remarkable nature of those gifts, lessening the truly miraculous working of the Spirit in the earliest stages of the church.

Cessationists are convinced that, by redefining *healing*, the charismatic position presents a bad testimony to the watching world when the sick are not healed. By redefining *tongues*, the charismatic position promotes a type of nonsensical gibberish that runs contrary to anything we know about the biblical gift. By redefining *prophecy*, the charismatic position lends credence to those who would claim to speak the very words of God and yet speak error.

This, then, is the primary concern of cessationists: that the honor of the Triune God and His Word be exalted—and that it not be cheapened by watered-down substitutes.

And how do we know if something is authentic or not? By comparing it to the written testimony of Scripture. Does going to the Bible to define the gifts mean that we are bypassing the Holy Spirit? Quite the contrary. When we search the Scriptures, we are going to the testimony of the Holy Spirit Himself to discover what He has revealed about the gifts that He bestowed.



As a cessationist, I love the Holy Spirit. I would never want to do anything to discredit His work, diminish His attributes, or downplay His ministry. Nor would I ever want to

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

miss out on anything He is doing in the church today. And I'm not the only cessationist who feels this way.

Because we love the Holy Spirit we are thankful to God for the Spirit's amazing and ongoing work in the body of Christ. His works of regenerating, indwelling, baptizing, sealing, assuring, illuminating, convicting, comforting, confirming, filling, and enabling are all indispensable aspects of His ministry.

Because we love the Holy Spirit we are motivated to study the Scriptures that He inspired to learn how to walk in a manner worthy, being characterized by His fruit. We long to be filled by Him ([Eph. 5:18](#)), which begins by being indwelt with His Word, which is the Word of Christ ([Col. 3:16-17](#)), and being equipped with His sword, which is the Word of God ([Eph. 6:17](#)).

Finally, it is because we love the Holy Spirit that we long to rightly represent Him, to understand and appreciate His purposes (as He has revealed them in His Word), and to align ourselves with what He is doing in this world. This more than anything else gives us reason to study the issue of charismatic gifts (cf. [1 Cor. 12:7-11](#)). Our goal in this study has to be more than mere doctrinal correctness. Our motivation must be to gain a more accurate understanding of the Spirit's work—such that we might better yield ourselves to Him in service to Christ for the glory of God.

* * * * *

4 Cessationism is not a product of the Enlightenment.

Perhaps the easiest way to demonstrate this final point is to cite pre-Enlightenment Christian leaders who held to a cessationist position. It is, after all, difficult to argue that John Chrysostom's fourth-century theology was a result of 18th-century European rationalism.

In bringing this blog post to a close then, here are **ten leaders from church history** to consider:

1. John Chrysostom (c. 344–407):

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

This whole place [speaking about 1 Corinthians 12] is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place.⁵

2. Augustine (354–430):

In the earliest times, the Holy Spirit fell upon them that believe and they spoke with tongues, which they had not learned, as the Spirit gave them utterance. These were signs adapted to the time. For there was this betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues [languages] to show that the gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a sign, and it passed away.⁶

3. Theodoret of Cyrus (c. 393–c. 466):

In former times those who accepted the divine preaching and who were baptized for their salvation were given visible signs of the grace of the Holy Spirit at work in them. Some spoke in tongues which they did not know and which nobody had taught them, while others performed miracles or prophesied. The Corinthians also did these things, but they did not use the gifts as they should have done. They were more interested in showing off than in using them for the edification of the church. . . . Even in our time grace is given to those who are deemed worthy of holy baptism, but it may not take the same form as it did in those days.⁷

Note: Proponents of continuationism, like Jon Ruthven (in his work, *On the Cessation of the Charismata*), also acknowledge cessationist views in other church fathers (like **Origen** in the 3rd century, and **Ambrosiaster** in the 4th century).

Additionally, to this list, we could include the most well-known name of the middle ages, the 13th century scholastic, **Thomas Aquinas**.

*But let's jump ahead to the **Reformation and Puritan eras**.*

4. Martin Luther (1483–1546)

In the early Church the Holy Spirit was sent forth in visible form. He descended upon Christ in the form of a dove ([Matt. 3:16](#)), and in the likeness of fire upon the apostles and

⁵ Source: John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, 36.7. Chrysostom is commenting on 1 Cor 12:1–2 and introducing the entire chapter. Cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, in the Ancient Christian Commentary Series, 146.

⁶ Source: Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 6.10. Cf. Schaff, *NPNF*, First Series, 7:497–98.

⁷ Source: Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 240, 43; in reference to 1 Cor 12:1, 7. Cited from *1–2 Corinthians*, ACCS, 117.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

other believers. ([Acts 2:3](#).) This visible outpouring of the Holy Spirit was necessary to the establishment of the early Church, as were also the miracles that accompanied the gift of the Holy Ghost. Paul explained the purpose of these miraculous gifts of the Spirit in [1 Corinthians 14:22](#), “Tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not.” Once the Church had been established and properly advertised by these miracles, the visible appearance of the Holy Ghost ceased.⁸

5. John Calvin (1509–1564):

*Though Christ does not expressly state whether he intends this gift [of miracles] to be temporary, or to remain perpetually in the Church, yet it is more probable that miracles were promised only for a time, in order to give lustre to the gospel while it was new or in a state of obscurity.*⁹

*The gift of healing, like the rest of the miracles, which the Lord willed to be brought forth for a time, has vanished away in order to make the preaching of the Gospel marvellous for ever.*¹⁰

6. John Owen (1616–1683):

*Gifts which in their own nature exceed the whole power of all our faculties, that dispensation of the Spirit is long since ceased and where it is now pretended unto by any, it may justly be suspected as an enthusiastic delusion.*¹¹

7. Thomas Watson (1620–1686):

*Sure, there is as much need of ordination now as in Christ’s time and in the time of the apostles, there being then extraordinary gifts in the church which are now ceased.*¹²

8. Matthew Henry (1662–1714):

*What these gifts were is at large told us in the body of the chapter [1 Corinthians 12]; namely, extraordinary offices and powers, bestowed on ministers and Christians in the first ages, for conviction of unbelievers, and propagation of the gospel.*¹³

⁸ Source: Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians 4*, Trans. by Theodore Graebner [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1949], pp. 150-172. This is from Luther’s comment on Gal. 4:6.

⁹ Source: John Calvin, *Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, III:389.

¹⁰ Source: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV:19, 18.

¹¹ Source: John Owen, *Works*, IV:518.

¹² Source: Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 140.

¹³ Source: Matthew Henry, *Complete Commentary*, in reference to 1 Corinthians 12.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

The gift of tongues was one new product of the spirit of prophecy and given for a particular reason, that, the Jewish pale being taken down, all nations might be brought into the church. These and other gifts of prophecy, being a sign, have long since ceased and been laid aside, and we have no encouragement to expect the revival of them; but, on the contrary, are directed to call the scriptures the more sure word of prophecy, more sure than voices from heaven; and to them we are directed to take heed, to search them, and to hold them fast, [2 Peter 1:29](#).¹⁴

9. John Gill (1697–1771):

[Commenting on [1 Corinthians 12:9](#) and [30](#)]

Now these gifts were bestowed in common, by the Spirit, on apostles, prophets, and pastors, or elders of the church, in those early times: the Alexandrian copy, and the Vulgate Latin version, read, “by one Spirit”.¹⁵

No; when these gifts were in being, all had them not. When anointing with oil, in order to heal the sick, was in use, it was only performed by the elders of the church, not by the common members of it, who were to be sent for by the sick on this occasion.¹⁶

10. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758):

In the days of his [Jesus’] flesh, his disciples had a measure of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, being enabled thus to teach and to work miracles. But after the resurrection and ascension, was the most full and remarkable effusion of the Spirit in his miraculous gifts that ever took place, beginning with the day of Pentecost, after Christ had risen and ascended to heaven. And in consequence of this, not only here and there an extraordinary person was endowed with these extraordinary gifts, but they were common in the church, and so continued during the lifetime of the apostles, or till the death of the last of them, even the apostle John, which took place about a hundred years from the birth of Christ; so that the first hundred years of the Christian era, or the first century, was the era of miracles.

But soon after that, the canon of Scripture being completed when the apostle John had written the book of Revelation, which he wrote not long before his death, these miraculous gifts were no longer continued in the church. For there was now completed an established written revelation of the mind and will of God, wherein God had fully recorded a standing and all-sufficient rule for his church in all ages. And the Jewish church and nation being overthrown, and the Christian church and the last dispensation of the church of God being

¹⁴ Source: Matthew Henry, Preface to Vol. IV of his *Exposition of OT & NT*, vii.

¹⁵ Source: John Gill’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:9.

¹⁶ Source: John Gill’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:30.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

*established, the miraculous gifts of the Spirit were no longer needed, and therefore they ceased; for though they had been continued in the church for so many ages, yet then they failed, and God caused them to fail because there was no further occasion for them. And so was fulfilled the saying of the text, "Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away." And now there seems to be an end to all such fruits of the Spirit as these, and we have no reason to expect them any more.*¹⁷

*"Of the extraordinary gifts, they were given 'in order to the founding and establishing of the church in the world. But since the canon of Scriptures has been completed, and the Christian church fully founded and established, these extraordinary gifts have ceased."*¹⁸

* * * * *

To this list, we could add other names: James Buchanan, R.L. Dabney, Charles Spurgeon, George Smeaton, Abraham Kuyper, William G.T. Shedd, B.B. Warfield, A.W. Pink, and so on. But, admittedly, they are *post-Enlightenment* historical figures.

So I guess we'll have to save their testimony for a different post.

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¹⁷ Source: Jonathan Edwards, Sermon entitled, "The Holy Spirit Forever To Be Communicated To The Saints, In The Grace Of Charity, Or Divine Love" on 1 Corinthians 13:8.

¹⁸ Source: Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and its Fruits*, 29.