

Did Tongues Cease or Not?

by Phil Johnson

Time to face honestly the reality that contemporary *charismata* aren't anything like the original Pentecostal miracles. Let's not be too quick to write off cessationism.

It is an irrefutable fact of history that the supernatural phenomena described in Acts 2 were peculiar to that one day of Pentecost and have not been normative in the life of the church over the centuries.

Several visible and audible supernatural features occurred when the Holy Spirit was sent to empower the church at Pentecost. In all of Scripture and church history none of those miracles has ever been credibly documented in any other incident. There was a "noise like a violent rushing wind" (Acts 2:2); visible "tongues as of fire" that rested on the apostles (v. 3); and crowds of thousands, all simultaneously hearing understandable, inspired revelation in their own languages as the Spirit gave utterance (vv. 4-11).

In other words, the spoken "tongues" at Pentecost were known, translatable, human languages. (Verses 9-11 list by name ten distinct language groups that were heard.) The human instruments through whom the miracle occurred evidently included not only the apostles but more than a hundred of their cohorts as well (cf. Acts 1:15). All of them spoke in tongues at once—unscripted, unrehearsed, and totally unexpected. There simply is no parallel for what occurred on that singular day. It was the inaugural day of the New Testament church. It was unique by God's own design.

TONGUES AFTER PENTECOST

In all the narrative portions of the New Testament there are only two verses outside Acts 2 where speaking in tongues is even mentioned: Acts 10:46 and 19:6. Both texts record significant transitional events in the establishment of the New Testament church.

Acts 10 describes the conversion of Cornelius and his household—the first graphic proof that the middle wall of partition between the Jewish nation and the rest of the world had been broken down. Tongues on that occasion furnished undeniable proof that the Spirit of God would henceforth indwell Gentile believers exactly as He indwelt those original disciples in Jerusalem.

The Acts 19 incident symbolically marks the completion of the transition from Old Covenant to New. With that transition came a new, unprecedented relationship with the Holy Spirit, who would henceforth permanently indwell every believer. These disciples of John the Baptist were Old Covenant saints—men who had come to saving faith and then evidently left the region before Jesus announced the gospel and before His ministry began to eclipse John the Baptist's. Once John's disciples heard and believed the full truth about Jesus, they were immediately brought into the New Covenant relationship. Tongues were the proof that they had received the Spirit just like the disciples at Pentecost.

Other than Pentecost and those two subsequent transitional incidents, the only place in the New Testament where speaking in tongues is mentioned is in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. His main reason for dealing with the subject in that context

was to correct those in Corinth who had elevated tongues to a position of undue prominence. Notice: Paul ranked tongues as the *least* of all spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:28). He expressly denied that jabbering noises devoid of discernible meaning were a legitimate expression of the Holy Spirit's gift of tongues (14:10). On the contrary, he stressed that authentic tongues were a form of divine revelation. (That's precisely what Acts 2:4 means: "as the Spirit was giving them utterance.") Paul therefore forbade speaking in tongues unless the message could be translated and its meaning confirmed (1 Corinthians 14:27-28).

None of those principles is given proper consideration by contemporary charismatics. Indeed, the so-called charismatic phenomena that abound today don't really look anything like the supernatural manifestations that occurred at Pentecost.

There is every biblical, historical, and theological reason to conclude that the gift of tongues has ceased. That goes for all other forms of revelatory prophecy that were common in the apostolic era.

CESSATIONISM

Prior to the 20th century it would have been hard to find any Protestant who believed the gift of tongues (or any of the revelatory gifts) continued uninterrupted from the time of the apostles through all of church history. The evidence of history speaks loudly against that view. Practically all biblically-minded believers prior to the 1900s regarded revelatory gifts and miraculous abilities as "the signs of a true apostle" (2 Corinthians 12:12). Such gifts faded from prominence in the early church even before most of the New Testament epistles were written. By the time the apostolic era ended, trustworthy accounts of apostolic-quality signs and wonders had ceased completely.

That view is known as *cessationism*. It was almost uncontested among evangelicals for hundreds of years before the mid-twentieth century. Church history is of course peppered with superstitious marvels, exaggerated urban legends, spurious relics, and fraudulent miracle-workers. (Bogus miracle-claims increased dramatically in medieval times along with the rise of extrabiblical sacerdotalism and the festering corruption of the Catholic priesthood.) But from the post-apostolic era until the 1960s Christians who sought to be biblically-based and theologically orthodox did *not* believe or claim that they had apostolic miracle-gifts at their disposal.

CONTINUATIONISM

Things have certainly changed. Cessationism is categorically out of vogue today. Not only has the charismatic movement become massively popular on a worldwide scale, but even many non-charismatics have backed away from classic cessationism, giving it up for *continuationism*, the belief that all the spiritual gifts of the apostolic era are still available to the church today—particularly those gifts that involved prophetic and miraculous phenomena.

Continuationism typically fosters an undue fascination with (and craving for) gifts that confer miraculous abilities. Of course, one of the hallmarks of charismatic teaching has always been the idea that it is the birthright of every Christian to prophesy and do miracles. That belief is based on a misunderstanding of Joel 2:28-32 (quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17-21). Notice that the text speaks of apocalyptic signs—tokens of judgment, actually—in the sun, moon, and sky. That aspect of Joel's prophecy clearly points toward something yet future. Without getting sidetracked with a lengthy analysis of the eschatological significance of Joel 2, it ought to be clear from the text itself that Joel's prophecy encompasses far more than the tongues of Pentecost. *Joel's* main focus is an unprecedented display of divine power in the heavens. Most of the

signs he describes are undeniable cosmic wonders—something far more convincing than the questionable “miracles” claimed by the contemporary charismatic movement.

In any case, when *Peter* quoted Joel’s prophecy at Pentecost, what he emphasized was the promise of salvation: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” That was the introduction to Peter’s sermon. He said nothing whatsoever about the apocalyptic elements of Joel 2. He said nothing further about speaking in tongues or prophesying. Peter’s Pentecost sermon was not a message about the *charismata*; it was about Christ’s work of redemption and the guilt of the nation for having crucified their Messiah. Acts 2 and Joel 2 combined simply do not bear the weight of continuationist doctrine.

All charismatics are continuationists by definition, of course. And not so long ago, virtually all *non*-charismatics were convinced cessationists. The lines of difference and debate were clearly drawn.

Those distinctions have been severely blurred by the advent of a middle-road position. Many non-charismatics now hold a continuationist view of the apostolic-era gifts. Typically they say they find continuationism compelling not because they think today’s charismatic phenomena actually look like apostolic miracles (they clearly don’t), but because they have concluded there is no sound exegetical basis for the cessationist position.

On the surface, that may sound like a conscientiously biblical and objectively even-handed position. In practice, however, it has led to a significant decline in critical thinking about charismatic claims. The middle of the road is a hard place to hold one’s ground, and there is a relentless magnetism between continuationist presuppositions and charismatic practices.

THE DEATH OF DISCERNMENT

Meanwhile, as cessationist conviction has fallen out of fashion, the voice of biblical discernment has been all but silenced. Among Reformed and evangelical leaders, it sometimes seems as if a moratorium has been declared against any negative assessment of modern charismatic doctrine or practice. Over the past decade and a half, leading Reformed continuationists have shown an almost obstinate unwillingness to voice any strong words of caution against even the most outlandish charismatic fads.

To cite a few examples: John Piper and his pastoral staff investigated the Toronto Blessing in the 1990s and declined to make any judgment about whether it was spurious or not. Sam Storms lent his credibility to the so-called Kansas City Prophets for at least a decade. Wayne Grudem likewise aligned himself with some very bizarre prophetic abuses in his association with the Vineyard movement and its offshoots. Jack Deere renounced cessationism in the 1980s and within a few short years virtually engineered the spiritual train wreck that culminated in the public disqualification of Paul Cain. And I can’t think of a single Reformed continuationist leader who sounded a clear warning (or even a mild disclaimer) about Todd Bentley’s shenanigans when the Lakeland disaster was at its peak.

It seems fair, then, to point out that the Reformed continuationist track record has been less than stellar with regard to resisting dangerous and unbiblical elements in the charismatic movement. That ought to be a burning embarrassment to our Reformed continuationist brethren.

A CLOSER LOOK AT CONTINUATIONIST CLAIMS

Furthermore, it seems to me that the continuationist position is both logically and exegetically indefensible. The distinctive claim of contemporary charismatic and

Pentecostal teaching is that all the *charismata* are available today just as they were in apostolic times. In particular, continuationists teach that the miraculous and revelatory gifts seen in the very early church never ceased. Supposedly, everything the Holy Spirit was doing throughout the book of Acts and 1 Corinthians 12-14 should still be happening today. That's the inevitable implication of true, consistent continuationism.

The problem is that virtually *no one* really believes that. Consistent continuationists are not only extremely rare; they are also exceedingly dangerous—often claiming apostolic authority for themselves and usually acting as if they believed the most vital and authoritative revelation available to the church today is to be found not in Scripture, but in their own dreams and prophecies about the latest "move of God."

It is a clear and indisputable implication of Scripture that the miraculous gifts of the apostolic era had a specific and clearly defined purpose. It is likewise clear from Scripture that apostolic miracles *did* diminish in both frequency and importance, and they faded from use after the era described in the book of Acts.

In the earliest days of the church, Peter and John healed a man who had been lame since birth (Acts 3:2-8). Even Peter's shadow had healing power (Acts 5:15-16). When the gospel first came to Ephesus, the sick could be healed and demonized people liberated by contact with pieces of fabric that Paul had touched (Acts 19:12).

But at the end of his ministry, Paul left Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20), and he counseled Timothy to drink wine medicinally for "frequent ailments" (1 Timothy 5:23). That, by the way, was years before the New Testament canon was complete. Moreover, the decline of miracle gifts was fully to be expected based on what Scripture *does* say about miracles. Miracles validated the apostles' authority and confirmed their testimony "at the first" (Hebrews 2:3-4). They were not permanently normative, even in the apostolic era. They were an essential corroboration of the preached message in that transitional era between the covenants.

There is no question that many important things were in flux during the transition from the Old Covenant era to the New. The whole point of the book of Hebrews is that the ceremonial law of the Old Testament is no longer binding on believers in the New Testament era. The priesthood, and the Tabernacle, and the whole sacrificial system are no longer part of God's relationship with His people.

Why? Because those things all pointed to something better. And now that the better thing has come, the inferior things are done away with. (That is the very same point the apostle Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 14, where he deals with the gift of tongues.) It is a principle that makes some degree of cessationism a necessity for people who take the Bible seriously.

LOOKING FOR A PROOF-TEXT?

Charismatics and continuationists will inevitably return to the main point they think settles the issue: there is no passage or proof-text that tells us the miracle-gifts would cease at the end of the apostolic era. Furthermore, continuationists believe they *do* have proof-texts for their position. Hebrews 13:5: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." There's also John 14:12, where Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do."

But consider what those verses actually teach. Hebrews 13:8 says nothing about the apostolic gifts. It's about the immutability of Christ's character.

In fact, the problem with the Hebrews 13:8 argument is that it proves too much. If that verse proves that everything in the book of Acts should be happening "forever," what about "yesterday"? Does the verse also suggest that these things must have been

happening throughout redemptive history? *Were* miracles commonplace throughout the Old Testament? For that matter, did anyone ever repeat the miracles Moses performed? If the principle of Hebrews 13:8 proves continuationism, why are miracles relatively rare not only in the Old Testament, but also in the later narrative passages of the New Testament?

After Moses, we see multiple miracles from Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha. Scripture also describes a handful of isolated miracles involving some of the Judges and prophets. But miracles were by no means commonplace—nor were they a reliable gauge of whether God is working or not. God is *always* working providentially, but miracle-gifts are extremely rare.

Consider John the Baptist. In Matthew 11:11, Jesus said: "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist." If miracle-working ability were a valid measure of one's greatness and power, we might expect someone like John the Baptist to be an amazing miracle worker. After all, according to Luke 1:17, John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus "in the spirit and power of Elijah." Elijah, of course, did many miracles. Miracles were practically the emblem of his ministry. But John 10:41 says "John did no miracle." What happens to the typical charismatic application of Hebrews 13:8 in light of John the Baptist's ministry?

For that matter, what about John 14:12? When charismatics cite that verse, it's fair to ask: Is there any miracle-worker in the entire charismatic realm who has ever actually performed greater *signs and wonders* than Jesus did? The answer, definitively, is no. But that's not the promise of John 14:12 anyway. The text promises "greater works," not more spectacular signs. The apostles' work of preaching the gospel exceeded Jesus' ministry in immediate *scope*—not in power or perfection. They "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

As a cessationist, I'm willing to concede that there is no easy proof-text that furnishes a ready explanation in a single, explicit biblical statement about when and how the apostolic outpouring of miracles ceased. But I don't find that argument particularly persuasive. It's not really different from the argument of the Jehovah's Witness who points out that there's not a single proof-text that proves the doctrine of the Trinity. What is the appropriate answer to that? The doctrine of the Trinity is the fruit of comparing Scripture with Scripture and understanding *everything* the Bible teaches about the Godhead.

The same principle applies to cessationism.

Cessationists base their conviction not on a single proof text or exegetical argument. It is a theological conclusion drawn from a number of biblical arguments, borne out by the plain facts of history.

Again, Scripture *does* teach that the *charismata* had a specific, foundational, temporary purpose. They are part of a hierarchy of supernatural signs and wonders associated with the founding of the church. That hierarchy is clearly outlined in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30, and the text expressly states that the miraculous gifts are *not* given universally to everyone in the church:

God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

Not every church leader is an apostle. By that very same principle, gifts of tongues and

miracles were never intended for every believer.

Nowhere in Scripture are we taught that the life of every Christian is supposed to be one long string of miracles. "Signs and wonders and mighty works" are expressly called "the signs of a true apostle" in 2 Corinthians 12:12. The miraculous elements that were so common in the early apostolic church were given *to validate and authenticate the apostles' authority*. Apostles were instruments of divine revelation. The miracles were undeniable verification that these men who claimed to be speaking for God were indeed speaking the truth of God with God's authorization. In the words of Hebrews 2:4, "God [was bearing them] witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

YOU'RE PROBABLY A CESSATIONIST, TOO

Regardless of your views about the charismatic gifts—unless you are someone who is far out on the fringe of charismatic lunacy—you probably believe the apostolic office ended with the death of the apostle John. Here's the thing: There is no proof text for that.

Can we agree also with the historic Protestant conviction that the canon of Scripture is complete and closed? New, inspired, inerrant, authoritative Scripture is not being written today.

But there is no easy, irrefutable proof text for that, either.

The biblical and historical rationale all Protestants use to justify our belief that the canon is closed is the very same biblical and theological logic that persuades me the miraculous gifts served their purpose in the apostolic generation and no longer function in the church.

I'll go further: *I think in their hearts, even the best charismatics believe that more than they might wish to admit*. No one but the rankest crackpot charlatan (or a pope) would ever claim to be a pure and complete open-canon non-cessationist with infallible apostolic authority. Consider this carefully: charismatics who acknowledge that the canon is closed and the gift of apostleship has ceased *have already conceded the very heart of the cessationist argument*, proof text or no.

That's not all. Continuationists who genuinely seek to be biblical cannot possibly defend the assertion that all the charismatic gifts are functioning today in exactly the same way they did in the book of Acts. And even though many will loudly claim otherwise, they have not shown any willingness to put that claim to the test. I became a Christian 40 years ago in Tulsa, a thriving center of charismatic activity. For decades I have been challenging my charismatic friends to document a single verifiable, authenticated, apostolic-quality miracle-gift. (For example: identify someone who has the ability regularly and reliably to command healings, the way Peter and Paul did.) I have yet to meet a charismatic miracle-worker who is willing to subject his miracle-gift-claims to any kind of careful, biblical scrutiny.

Think about this: millions of people claim to be speaking in tongues, but there is not a single well-attested, tape-recorded, verifiable case of a recognizable, translatable, identifiable language such as we see at Pentecost. Has any charismatic preacher truly raised a Eutychus from the dead? With the 20th century's proliferation of charismatic faith-healers, why do the healings nearly always involve invisible ailments? Why are people with congenital disabilities, complete blindness, and other permanent infirmities routinely screened from the healing lines?

Wayne Grudem has more or less conceded that the charismatic phenomena of today are not really apostolic-quality spiritual gifts. His book *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988) was written to defend the

practice of seeking personal prophecies directly from God. A hundred pages or so into the book, Grudem makes the startling claim that "no responsible charismatic holds" the view that prophecy today is infallible and inerrant revelation from God.¹ He says charismatics are arguing for a "lesser kind of prophecy,"² which is not on the same level as the inspired prophecies of the Old Testament prophets or the New Testament apostles—and which will probably be fallible more often than not.

Grudem writes, "there is almost uniform testimony from all sections of the charismatic movement that [today's] prophecy is impure, and will contain elements which are not to be obeyed or trusted."

In *Surprised by the Power of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), Jack Deere likewise admits that he has not seen anyone today performing miracles or possessing gifts of the same quality as those that were being manifest in the apostolic era. Deere argues throughout his book that modern charismatics do not really claim to have apostolic-quality gifts and miracle abilities. One of Deere's main lines of defense against critics of the charismatic movement is his claim that modern charismatic gifts are actually lesser gifts than those available in the apostolic era, and therefore, he suggests, today's charismatics should not be held to apostolic standards.

Consider the implications of that claim: The chief apologists for charismatic theology have, in effect, conceded the entire cessationist argument. They have virtually admitted that they are themselves cessationists of sorts. They are in effect confessing that the true apostolic gifts and miracles have ceased, admitting that what they are doing today is not what is described in the New Testament.

Contemporary tongues-speakers do not speak in understandable or translatable dialects, the way the apostles and their followers did at Pentecost. Not one tongues speaker has ever gone to a foreign mission-field and miraculously been able to preach the gospel in the tongue of his hearers. Charismatics have to go to language school like everyone else.

No modern worker of signs and wonders can really duplicate apostolic power.

Even the most vocal advocates of the gift of prophecy admit that no modern prophet can legitimately claim to have infallible authority.

No modern faith healer can actually produce instant, visible healings that are like the healings we see in the New Testament. Though some make fantastic claims, no modern faith healer is opening the eyes of people born blind, and no one is able to make truly lame people walk.

Above all, despite many fanciful and unsubstantiated legends that have been circulated, despite the vast numbers of charismatics who claim the ability to do even greater works than Jesus Himself, there is not one credible, verifiable case of a charismatic miracle-worker who can raise the dead.

The simple fact is that the gifts that operate in the charismatic movement today are *not* the same gifts described in the New Testament, and even most charismatics are ultimately forced to admit that.

It's time for Reformed continuationists to face these facts humbly and honestly. Instead of stifling debate about charismatic doctrine in the name of charity and unity, we ought to be pursuing the debate with greater vigor, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith" (Ephesians 4:13).

¹Grudem, p. 111.

²Ibid, p. 112.