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The Case for Cessationism Stands

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:28; 1 Corinthians 13:10; Ephesians 2:20–22
Code: B140505

When Grace to You asked me to present the biblical case for cessationism at the Strange Fire conference last October, I was excited about the opportunity. Although I am a convinced cessationist and had addressed this issue with my own congregation, I spent several months studying the Scripture and reading the relevant literature on both sides of this contentious issue. But it wasn't long before my initial euphoria turned to discouragement.

The problem was not (as some continuationists argue) because there is insufficient biblical evidence for cessationism to preach on for an hour. My problem was the sheer extravagance of biblical material. I was faced with a difficult decision between equally tempting choices: to spend the hour I was given developing one argument or to present a brief summary of the primary arguments. Both choices were fraught with slippery slopes and gaping chasms. If I concentrated on one argument, the uninformed on both sides of the issue would race to the conclusion that cessationism is a tune with only one string and one note. But if I tried to cover all the main arguments, I would have to leave crucial points and counterpoints on the cutting-room floor, appearing to leave holes in an argument that has none. If you listened to my message at Strange Fire, you know that I eventually opted for the lesser of two evils—the second.

In light of the difficulty of that decision, I have been fascinated by the responses to the biblical case I presented. Cessationists have written to say that the conference strengthened their confidence in the Scripture. I have heard from practicing charismatics who had been told there are no biblical arguments for cessationism but who were troubled by what they saw in their churches. In God's providence they listened to Strange Fire, the truth they heard resonated with their hearts, and they have since left the charismatic movement for good.

Frankly, much of the online opposition has been all heat and no light. Some critiques have been so apparently self-defeating that they neither require nor deserve a reasoned response. Among the mostly gracious and careful responses to the case for cessationism, Andrew Wilson's critique stands out. Several on both sides of the issue have suggested I respond to the issues he raised. So that is what I will do here.

Surprisingly, Wilson devotes the first half of his critique to defending the common arguments for continuationism that I mentioned in passing in my introduction. First, he quotes the arguments as Tim Challies summarized them, and then he defends them. So I will quote Challies's summaries and the key portions of Wilson's critique.

(1) *The New Testament doesn't say they [miraculous gifts] have ceased. But then again, it doesn't say that they won't either.*

Wilson responds:

The burden of proof is firmly on the shoulders of the one who would place a break at the end of the New Testament period, for the simple reason that, throughout Scripture, substantial changes in the way God communicates with people—and cessationism posits a substantial change . . . —are clearly communicated.

But there were, in fact, two huge changes at the end of the New Testament period—changes that even most charismatics (including Wilson) admit can be discerned from the New Testament but that are not clearly announced in one clarion passage. Those two changes are (1) the end of the unique apostolate and (2) the end of canonical revelation. When charismatics state their case against cessationism as Wilson does, they unintentionally also surrender the field to apostolic succession and ongoing canonical revelation.

(2) *1 Corinthians 13:10 - they [continuationists] say this means that only when Christ returns will the partial gifts of tongues and prophecies cease. This implies that the gifts continue. But this is an uncertain interpretation.*

To this argument Wilson responds:

The charismatic case here [1 Corinthians 13:10] is immensely strong (and the overwhelming scholarly consensus in the commentaries would confirm this). For Paul, the imperfect (prophecy, tongues, knowledge) will cease at the arrival of the perfect (the return of Christ, when we shall see him face to face). Not much uncertainty there.

That is a case of both overstatement and misdirection. It is overstatement because a survey of commentaries will reveal as many as ten possible interpretations of what “the perfect” is. It is misdirection in that charismatics ignore that for most of church history this text was used primarily to argue against the continuation of the miraculous gifts. I freely admit that some cessationists have tried to make this text bear too much weight. But it is equally true that many charismatics, including Wilson in the quote above, try to make it bear too much weight in their defense.

(3) *The New Testament speaks only of the church age, and so, [continuationists] argue, the gifts that began the church age should continue throughout it. They say we artificially divide it between apostolic and post-apostolic eras. But they do this, too, by not believing that the apostolic office still continues.*

Wilson writes:

Actually, a huge number of charismatics don’t believe this at all. Many believe, for reasons outlined in

my recent article in JETS, that even in the New Testament period there were eyewitness apostles (the twelve, Paul, James) and people who never witnessed the resurrection but were referred to as apostles anyway (Apollos, very likely Barnabas, Silas, possibly Timothy, and so on), and that while the eyewitness category ceased with Paul, the other category didn't.

Here, I confess, I was personally disappointed in Wilson. His comments reveal either that he just read the paraphrased version of my message on Tim Challies's site or that he was careless—either of which is troubling in a person of his intelligence and education.

If he had listened to my complete message or read the transcript, he would have known that I acknowledged that most charismatics don't believe there are eyewitness apostles today. That was my point. I specifically said that unless charismatics believe that there are apostles today at the same level as Peter and Paul—and most charismatics don't—they also divide the church age. And they relegate at least apostleship solely to the apostolic era. They have become *de facto* cessationists—at least in part.

Positing a second tier of apostles as some do (which ignores any nontechnical, nontitular sense of the word *apostolos* in the New Testament) doesn't change the point. In fact, their protest proves the point. There was a marked difference between the apostolic and postapostolic eras. And by agreeing that the most significant mark of the age of the apostles—the men Jesus Himself appointed and called to be His official proxies—ceased, charismatics tacitly accept one of the key tenets of cessationism.

(4) *500 million professing Christians who claim charismatic experiences can't all be wrong. But if we accept this, then logically we should accept the miracles attested to by one billion Catholics in the world. The truth is that 500 million-plus people can be wrong.*

Wilson responds:

This is not really a fair representation of any responsible charismatic argument. Of course billions of people can be wrong: billions of people do not believe the gospel, and virtually no charismatic would contest that. A fairer representation would be to say that, in order to explain the enormous number of miraculous experiences testified to by charismatics . . . a cessationist has to resort to an awful lot of accusations of fraud, deliberate deceit and delusion amongst some extremely level-headed, critical and theologically informed individuals.

My statement is not only a fair representation of responsible charismatic argument, it is a very common—albeit informal—argument of reputable charismatic authors and scholars, as well as laymen. To appeal as Wilson does to what he calls the "enormous number of miraculous experiences testified to by charismatics" only reinforces my point. We have to accuse more than a billion Roman Catholics of "fraud, deliberate deceit and delusion" to reject their "miracles," yet that is exactly what the church has always done—and what I suspect Wilson himself does. If charismatics want to argue that sheer numbers lend credibility to their "miracles," they have to own the weakness that comes with this argument.

After spending half of his critique on the arguments continuationists use to defend their position, to which I devoted less than five minutes, Wilson comes to the primary arguments I presented.

I began by defining cessationism. Cessationists believe it is neither the Spirit's plan nor His normal pattern to distribute miraculous spiritual gifts to Christians and churches today as He did in the time of the apostles. Those gifts ceased being normative with the apostles. In Scripture we find at least **seven arguments that the miraculous gifts have ceased.** Again, since Wilson quotes Challies's summary of my points, I will as well.

(1) ***The unique role of miracles.*** *There were only three primary periods in which God worked miracles through unique men. The first was with Moses; the second was during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha; the third was with Christ and his apostles. The primary purpose of miracles has always been to establish the credibility of one who speaks the word of God—not just any teacher, but those who had been given direct words by God.*

Wilson writes:

The crucial word here, which appears twice and is somewhat mysterious on both occasions, is "primary." Where in the Bible does it say that the miracles of Moses, Elijah or Elisha are more "primary" than those of Joshua (opening the Jordan and stopping the sun in its tracks isn't bad), or Samuel (who had the odd prophecy), or David or Solomon, or Isaiah, or Daniel, or for that matter any of the canonical prophets (who, by Pennington's definition, are exercising miraculous gifts)?

First of all, the point is not about God's working miracles directly—something He did as He chose in both Old and New Testament history. Instead, the focus was on those epochs in redemptive history when God chose to give men the capacity to work miracles. There is a difference between God's giving Moses the capacity to perform miracles and God's directly giving Samson superhuman strength. Samson used the strength God gave him, but he never performed a miracle. And prophecy is a miraculous gift because God miraculously reveals His truth to a man. But the prophet is not performing a miracle.

When you examine the biblical record, it is clear that there were three main time periods when there were miracle-working men. Again, Wilson apparently didn't listen to my message or read the transcript, because the first period I mentioned was not that of Moses but that of "Moses and Joshua." And although God performed miracles directly during the ministries of Samuel, David, Isaiah, and Daniel, where is the biblical evidence that they were given miracle-working power in the way Moses and Joshua or Elijah and Elisha were? Create a comprehensive list of miracles performed by men in Scripture—not those performed by God directly—and the resulting list will support the point. In thousands of years of human history, there were only about two hundred years in which God empowered men to work miracles. And even during those years, miracles were not common, everyday events.

Wilson adds:

Where does it say that the "primary" purpose of a miracle is always to establish the credibility of the one who speaks the word of God? One might have thought the primary purpose of the exodus was to lead Israel out of slavery, and the primary purpose of the fall of Jericho was to defeat God's enemies, and the primary purpose of the destruction of the Assyrians was to preserve Jerusalem, and so on. And even if the "primary" purpose of all miracles was authenticating a preacher, which

cannot be shown, it would by no means indicate that this was the only purpose.

When God granted Moses—the first human miracle worker—the power to work miracles, He gave Moses only one reason: "that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you" (Exodus 4:5). I provided a number of other examples throughout the Scripture to demonstrate that God's primary purpose in giving men power to work miracles was to validate them as His messengers. Of course, God used Moses' miracles to free Israel from Egyptian bondage. But why did God give miracle-working capacity to Moses, rather than simply free the Israelites Himself? According to God's own statement, it was to validate His messenger. At Sinai, no one doubted that Moses spoke for God. Look up the other references I cited and you will find exactly the same pattern.

(2) ***The end of the gift of apostleship.*** *In two places in the New Testament Paul refers to the apostles as one of the gifts Christ gave his church (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4).*

Most Christians, including most evangelical charismatics, agree that there are no more apostles like the twelve or like Paul. So at least one New Testament gift—the gift of apostleship—has ceased. That means there is a significant difference in the work of the Spirit between the time of the apostles and today, because one of the most miraculous displays of the Spirit disappeared with the passing of the apostolic age. Once you agree that there are no apostles today at the same level with Peter and Paul, you have admitted there was a major change in the gifting of the Spirit between the Apostolic Age and the post-apostolic age. The one New Testament gift most frequently associated with miracles—the gift of apostleship—ceased.

Wilson responds:

This argument takes us nowhere: all agree that the eyewitness apostles have ceased, and all agree that (say) pastors and teachers have not ceased. Only if we can show that all New Testament miracles, prophecies, tongues and healings came via apostles—which is patently not the case—would this hold any water at all.

Here, Wilson's argument isn't clear, but he seems to be relying on an article he wrote for the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)* in which he argues for a two-tier approach to apostleship. He maintains that the Twelve, Paul, and several others were "eyewitness apostles," and those have ceased. But there are lower level apostles who are the Spirit's ongoing gift to the church.

Wilson concludes his *JETS* article with this:

Within conservative evangelicalism, it has become commonplace to divide the apostolate into two, neat types. There are the Apostles (capital "A") of Jesus Christ, comprising the twelve, James, Barnabas, possibly Silas, and then finally Paul: eyewitnesses of the resurrection, officers of the church, personally commissioned by Jesus, and with the capacity to write or authorise the scriptures, pioneer into new areas, lay foundations in churches, and exercise authority over them. Then there are the apostles (lower case "a") of the churches, including Andronicus, Junia, Epaphroditus, the brothers of 2 Corinthians 8:23, and possibly Timothy: messengers that were sent out among the churches, but with no eyewitness appearances or commission from Jesus, and without the capacity to write Scripture, pioneer, lay foundations or exercise authority over churches. On this view,

although there is occasional debate (as to which category, say, Ephesians 4:11 should correspond to), it is theoretically possible to dig up every occurrence of the word *apostolos* and put it squarely into one of these two categories.

The view that Wilson rejects above is not merely the common view of "conservative evangelicalism." It is the understanding of historic Christianity and even of many charismatic theologians. Wilson finishes his *JETS* article by saying that a possible reference to Apollos as an apostle in 1 Corinthians 4:9 (which the entire article argues for but never proves) "*may . . . suggest* that, according to Paul, although the appearances of the risen Jesus ceased with Paul's encounter on the Damascus road, the *apostoloi* did not" (emphasis added). In other words, maybe there is another office in the church—*Apostle, Second-Class*—that continued after the death of the Paul and the twelve.

The weight of proving this novel idea falls on charismatics. Wilson's conclusion that the best evidence he can muster "*may suggest*" a two-tiered apostolate is hardly enough to overturn two millennia of Spirit-enabled interpretation. The argument for cessationism based on the end of the gift of apostleship stands.

(3) ***The foundational nature of the New Testament apostles and prophets.*** *The New Testament identifies the apostles and prophets as the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20-22). In the context, it is clear that Paul is referring here not to Old Testament prophets but to New Testament prophets. Once the apostles and prophets finished their role in laying the foundation of the church, their gifts were completed.*

Wilson:

This [argument] runs aground on the sandbanks of Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12-14 in particular, in which it is assumed that local churches experience prophecy in their meetings, yet without such prophecy serving as foundational for the church for all time, or being written down in the canon. Clearly, there is a foundational role for the apostles and prophets of whom Paul speaks in Ephesians (2:20; 3:6), but this in no way implies either that all prophecy has now ceased, or (obviously) that tongues or healings have now ceased.

Most charismatics admit that the New Testament "prophets of whom Paul speaks in Ephesians (Ephesians 2:20; 3:6)" play "a foundational role." But then without any clear scriptural support, they assume that the prophecy mentioned in Romans and 1 Corinthians must be lower level prophecies. However, if there are not two levels of prophecy—which remains unproven—then Ephesians 2 is definitive. Both the apostles and prophets were the foundation of the church, and their roles were never intended to last.

(4) ***The nature of the New Testament miraculous gifts.*** *If the Spirit was still moving as he was in the first century, then you would expect that the gifts would be of the same type. Consider the speaking of tongues. At Pentecost, the languages spoken were already existing, understandable languages. The New Testament gift was speaking in a known language and dialect, not an ecstatic language like you see people speaking in today. Prophecies (which were then infallible) and healings are also different in character today from the NT period.*

Wilson writes:

Again, this hits serious problems when it comes to 1 Corinthians 12-14, which scholars widely agree refers to ecstatic speech rather than known earthly languages, and to prophetic revelation which needs to be weighed or judged, rather than instantly being added to the infallible canon of scripture.

Contrary to what Wilson implies, there are many scholarly works and commentaries that do not support the view that 1 Corinthians 14 refers to ecstatic speech. But even more important is the analogy of Scripture. When Luke wrote the book of Acts, he knew what Paul had written six or seven years earlier in 1 Corinthians 14. Moreover, Luke knew what was actually happening in the church in Corinth. Yet without any caveat, Luke defines speaking in tongues as “we hear them speak in our own language” or our own dialect (Acts 2:7-8).

Wilson:

To say, further, that healings are different in character is to beg the question: there are numerous testimonies out there (I have heard many personally) of blind eyes seeing, deaf ears opening, the lame walking and even the dead being raised, unless one prejudges the veracity of such testimonies by assuming cessationism (or, of course, naturalism).

It is important to remember that all Christians believe God can cause blind eyes to see, open deaf ears, and even cause the lame to walk again. But the key issue is whether God still distributes to people the miraculous ability to heal others. When it comes to the supposed modern miraculous gift of healing, there are always “testimonies out there” and those who believe them “have heard many personally.” But there are rarely firsthand accounts, and there is never verifiable evidence of the miraculous gift of healing—much less of the ability to raise the dead!

(5) ***The testimony of church history.*** *The practice of apostolic gifts declines even during the lifetimes of the apostles. Even in the written books of the New Testament, the miraculous gifts are mentioned less as the date of their writing gets later. After the New Testament era, we see the miraculous gifts cease. John Chrysostom and Augustine speak of their ceasing.*

Wilson:

There are two errors here. The first is that miracles are mentioned less in New Testament books that are written later; the book of Acts is certainly written after the books of 1 Thessalonians and James, and very probably after the other Paulines and Petrines, yet contains far more miracles (and John, among the latest books, has one or two miracles in it as well!).

I was not speaking of the working of miracles by the apostles (2 Corinthians 12:12) as Wilson seems to imply, but rather of the miraculous gifts given to individual Christians other than the apostles. When you trace the practice of the miraculous gifts by those other than the apostles against a time line of New Testament history and its letters, you will find that the miraculous gifts decline in their mention and use even during the apostolic period.

Wilson continues:

The second [error] is that we see the miraculous gifts cease after the New Testament; again, this begs the question by assuming that subsequent accounts of and responses to miraculous or prophetic activity, from the Didache and the Montanists onwards, are inaccurate or exaggerated. . . . In any case, this sort of argument—that, since something gradually disappeared from the church over the course of the first two or three centuries, it must therefore be invalid—should strike any five *sola* Protestant as providing several hostages to fortune."

Many scholars believe the original version of the Didache was probably written during the apostolic age, so it proves nothing about the continuation of the miraculous gifts after the time of the apostles. There are scattered reports of the miraculous throughout church history, but many of them are connected to groups and leaders whose doctrine was seriously aberrant in some way. And in spite of Tertullian's connection to the Montanists, the church eventually spoke with one voice against them.

The consistent testimony of the church's key leaders is that the miraculous and revelatory spiritual gifts ended with the Apostolic Age—they didn't "gradually disappear" over several centuries. I provided a sampling of quotes from across church history as proof. John MacArthur cites many others in his book *Strange Fire*. The consistent testimony of the Christian church's key leaders across church history poses a huge problem for our continuationist friends. As Sinclair Ferguson expressed it, continuationism provides no convincing theological explanation for the disappearance of certain gifts during most of church history.

(6) ***The sufficiency of Scripture.*** *The Spirit speaks only in and through the inspired Word. He doesn't call and direct his people through subjective messages and modern day bestsellers. His word is external to us and objective.*

Wilson responds:

This is not so much an argument for cessationism as a restatement of it. Suffice it to say that James and Paul, to mention just two apostles, envisage Christians being given wisdom by God, experiencing the Spirit crying out "Abba!" in their hearts, and being given spontaneous revelation during church meetings, none of which conflict with their high view of the scriptures."

I intentionally did not develop this point, because I knew Steve Lawson planned to address this issue in his message on *sola Scriptura*. You can listen to or read Steve's excellent defense **here**.

(7) ***The New Testament governed the miraculous gifts.*** *Whenever the New Testament gift of tongues was to be practiced, there were specific rules that were to be followed. There was to be order and structure, as well as an interpreter. Paul also lays down rules for prophets and prophecy. Tragically most charismatic practice today clearly disregards these commands. The result is not a work of the spirit but of the flesh.*

Wilson writes:

I'm not qualified to comment on whether this is true of "most" charismatics, rather than "some," but to the extent that this is true, I wholeheartedly agree with Pennington that miraculous gifts need to be governed and practiced wisely, in line with the New Testament. Clearly, however, this is not an argument against using charismatic gifts—it is an argument against using charismatic gifts badly.

To his credit, Wilson decries the unbiblical practice of the charismatic gifts. And I would agree that there are a few charismatic churches making valiant efforts at following Paul's directives. But he is too well read and informed not to know that charismatics claim to be 500 million strong. Of that number, more than 125 million are Roman Catholics who have embraced a false gospel. And of the remaining number, even charismatic writers estimate that close to 40 percent of the 500 million are involved with the prosperity gospel (other estimates have the percentage as high as 90 percent). Add in the huge audiences watching charismatic television programs and services where the biblical directives are not followed, and far more than 50 percent of a movement that claims to be a work of the Spirit is either preaching a damning gospel or completely disregarding the Spirit's clear New Testament commands regarding practice of the gifts. That is more than a few charismatics behaving badly. Instead, it demonstrates that the movement as a whole can claim neither the Scripture nor the Spirit.

Wilson concludes his critique: "I think that the cessationist position is biblically distorted, theologically confused and historically exaggerated." Sadly, it is the charismatic position that is out of step with the Scripture, with historic theology, and with the key figures of evangelical church history. The biblical case for cessationism still stands.

If you want to read more on charismatic issues, see the brief bibliography below.

A Brief Bibliography of Books Arguing for Cessationism

-John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*.
-John MacArthur, *Strange Fire*.
-Samuel Waldron, *To Be Continued?*.
[Best brief work on the issue for laymen]
-Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*.
[Best work on the role of the Holy Spirit, and a helpful defense of cessationism]
-Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. *Perspectives on Pentecost*.
[Recommended]
-B.B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*.
[Classic historical defense of the end of the miraculous but not a biblical defense; recommended]
-Robert Reymond, *What About Continuing Revelations and Miracles in the Presbyterian Church Today?*
[Recommended; deals primarily with the gift of tongues but also addresses the issue of cessation; out of print]
-Larry Pettigrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit.*
[Helpful work on the roles of the Spirit in the Old Testament & New Testament; section on cessation and tongues is helpful]
-Walter Chantry, *Signs of the Apostles*.
[Helpful but a bit dated]
-Robert Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts*.
[Great exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14]
-Robert Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement*.

-R.C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit*.

-Arthur Johnson, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism.*

-Graham Cole, *He Who Gives Life: the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.*

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