THE CHARISMATIC GIFTS DEBATE:
THE EXISTENCE AND APPLICATION OF THE MOVING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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AUGUST 2011
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Introduction

One of the most heated discussions within mainstream Christianity today is regarding what has been commonly known as the charismatic gifts the Holy Spirit. There are many varied beliefs on the subject, based off denominational ties, church affiliations, personal experience, and interpretation (or possibly misinterpretation) of Scripture. On the most conservative side, non-charismatic followers of Christ stand that the gifts of the Spirit have ceased to exist in modern times. On the most liberal side, charismatic followers of Christ stand that the gifts of the Spirit exist in today’s world.

Evidence that this topic needs discussion can be seen in 2007, when the Southern Baptist Convention had a three-day seminar about the Holy Spirit and the gifts in Arlington, Texas, to permit fellow baptists to not necessarily agree, but at least accept, differing views on the charismatic gifts. The convention was the result of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary refusing to air a sermon on their site, in which the pastor admitted having a private prayer language. While the SBC has generally remained neutral on the topic of charismatic gifts, this action led many to believe the SBC declared a stance on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. To add, the International Mission Board for the SBC has a ban on private prayer languages for their missionaries.1 Despite these active stances against the charismatic gifts, in continuance today, SBC president Frank Page had declared a neutral stance of acceptance of the differing views, as Scripture does not clearly prohibit believers to one particular stance.2


Given the controversial nature of this topic, there are bound to be hurt feelings and strong opinions on both sides. This paper will attempt to view both sides of the argument, the strengths, the weaknesses, and which stance is more biblically sound, including the minor variations.

Such addressed, it needs to be admitted that this paper is primarily a persuasive paper, intent to leading the reader to agree with the viewpoint of the continuationist stance of the charismatic gifts. With all other materials, readers should approach this paper like the Bereans, who studied the Scriptures at every statement, to ensure that proper biblical interpretation and explanation is followed.

Open discussion regarding this topic is encouraged. To participate in the conversation, please head over to scriptedgenius.com and either submit a comment on a related post, or complete the contact form with the comment.

**The Gifts of the Spirit**

In a 2009 survey of Americans that consider themselves to be evangelical Christians, a shocking number provided an unscriptural answer.

> “About one-fifth (21 percent) of respondents who said they have heard of spiritual gifts claimed to have gifts such as a sense of humor, singing, health, life, happiness, patience, a job, a house, compromise, premonition, creativity, and clairvoyance – ones that are not among those deemed to be spiritual gifts in the passages of Scripture that teach about gifts[.]”

The widespread confusion over the Gifts of the Spirit it two-fold: what the gifts are, and whether they exist today. For the purposes of this examination, only the gifts found in the Bible will be addressed.

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Scripturally-speaking, the controversy of the gifts of the Spirit surrounds Paul’s writing on Corinthians, specifically 1 Corinthians 12:7-10. These gifts are known as the charismatic gifts.⁴

“A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person to produce what is beneficial: to one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit, to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another, the performing of miracles, to another, prophecy, to another, distinguishing between spirits, to another, different kinds of languages, to another, interpretation of languages.(1 Corinthians 12:7-10)”⁵

This passage of Scripture has been difficult to interpret for many years, since the canonization. While Paul discusses these gifts further in chapters thirteen and fourteen, the primary Scripture addressed is chapter twelve. These other two chapters will, however, play a role in explaining the different viewpoints.

George Henry, writer for the Oxford Companion to the Bible, suggests that Romans also carries verses on the charismatic gifts.⁶

“The grace given to us, we have different gifts: If prophecy, use it according to the standard of one’s faith; if service, in service; if teaching, in teaching; if exhorting, in exhortation; giving, with generosity; leading, with diligence; showing mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:6-8)”

Romans does provide a potential alternate interpretation of prophecy, which will be addressed later. It also appears that service, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leading, and mercy are considered gifts as well.


⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

There are four primary viewpoints that we will examine in this dissertation. To start, we will examine the cessationist viewpoint, with a sub-section of semi-cessationist. Following, we will look at the continuationist viewpoint, with a sub-section of charismatic.\textsuperscript{7}

**The Cessationist View**

According to Merriam-Webster, cessation is defined as “a temporary or final ceasing (as of action).”\textsuperscript{8} In regards to the cessationist view, adherents to this viewpoint assert that the gifts of the Spirit have *ceased* to exist in modern times. Staunch supporters of this movement cite 1 Corinthians 13:8 as their defense, that the coming of “perfection” was the canon of Scripture.\textsuperscript{9}

Apart from stating this one verse as a defense, cessationists provide a strong offensive with biblical support. One such support is Ephesians 2:13, 18-22, which evidences that the charismatic gifts found in the New Testament were used for the building of the church foundation. They (the gifts) provided testament to the apostolic authority, helped set the church foundation, and exercised divine guidance during an era where no completed Scriptures were published.\textsuperscript{10} This statement requires the believer to infer that since the gifts are no longer required for church operation today, the gifts are no longer available for church operation today.

\textsuperscript{7} Barrick, "Southern Baptists Debate over Speaking in Tongues."


\textsuperscript{9} "Statement of Faith", Victory Baptist Church http://www.bendvictory.com/page.cfm?id=7#thepersonoftheholyspirit.

\textsuperscript{10} Boyd and Eddy, loc. 3457.
A tertiary statement of defense is found in 2 Corinthians 12:12, where Paul states the marks of a “true apostle,” including mighty signs and wonders. Human logic would follow that if an apostle is defined as impacted in the physical realm by Christ, then there are no apostles today, and the gifts should not be evident today.\(^\text{11}\) This claim is based off the assumption of that definition of apostle.

Back to the first Scripture citation, with the term “complete,” cessationists affirm that Paul meant this as a completion of the New Testament.\(^\text{12}\) However, Paul wrote much, and as a Jewish scribe, would have most likely been highly offended at the suggestion that his writings would create the core of a new testament to add to the Law and Prophets.

Cessationists don’t rely on solely Scripture, but also outside influences. Church history shows that charismatic gifts declined significantly after the closing of the canon. Additionally, cessationists believe that any modern gifts would require G-d to speak outside of the canon through said individuals, and that Revelation forbids adding any words.\(^\text{13}\) However, these assumptions (part two and three) are primarily incorrect, as the gifts do not necessarily require special knowledge (explained later), and the words in Revelation apply solely to Revelation, not Scripture as a whole.

**The Semi-Cessationist View**

The cessationist viewpoint requires an assumption in 1 Corinthians 13:8, on “complete,” that has already been questioned. John MacArthur, prominent theologian, cessationist,

\(^{11}\) Ibid., loc. 3474.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., loc. 3488.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., loc. 3493.
and Calvinist, addresses this issue. He states that verse eight does, in fact, refer to Christ. It does not refer to the rapture or second Coming, as we are still imperfect at that time, but at the end of the millenial reign, when we finally are perfected.\textsuperscript{14} In this, MacArthur states that the gifts will not expire at the completion of the canon, but did specifically mention tongues expiring. John MacArthur, in this sense, is a semi-cessationist. He believes that some of the gifts have ceased to operate, and that some continue. The gifts, according to MacArthur, fall under two categories: speaking and serving. There is a third category, considered special, that would cover the areas of charisma, which include miracles, languages, etc. These are considered temporary sign gifts, and were limited to only the apostles (see 2 Corinthians). The speaking and serving gifts, which include knowledge of Scripture, prophecy through evangelism (as referenced earlier as an alternative understanding), teaching, giving, and discernment, are permanent, until perfection.\textsuperscript{15} This viewpoint has a stronger Scriptural support than complete cessationism, and not reliant primarily on history or tradition, which Colossians 2:8 indirectly advises against.

**The Continuationist View**

The primary offense that cessationists make toward the charismatic gifts is that any practice of said gifts today are evidence of demonic influence.\textsuperscript{16} Continuationists view prophecy as two-fold: there is a gift of wisdom from G-d, and a gift of evangelism, referenced in Romans, not 1 Corinthians. In addition to Romans and 1 Corinthians

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} John MacArthur, *The Macarthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1598.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Boyd and Eddy, loc. 3377.
\end{itemize}
12:8-10, there are also gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Peter 4:10-11.\textsuperscript{17}

The first rebuttal to cessationist viewpoint is that disallowing one set of gifts, but permitting other sets found in the same passage of Scripture, is unbiblical and preferential. The beginning of 1 Corinthians includes the charismatic gifts.\textsuperscript{18} Additionally, Peter reminds believers to use any gift they’ve received as they can, for the end is quite near.\textsuperscript{19}

There is also reference of Paul’s command to strive for spiritual gifts, and to be eager for the charismatic, not evangelistic, gift of prophecy. In 1 Thessalonians 5:19, Paul commands believers to not stifle the Spirit. Additionally, in 1 Corinthians 14:30, Paul commands brethren to not just be eager to prophesy, but also to not forbid speaking in tongues. These instructions are given without any temporal instruction, nor is any reference provided that a new set of Scriptures would take effect.\textsuperscript{20}

Continuationists state that the term apostle does not imply lack of existence today, as apostle is defined as “sent one,” as referenced in Ephesians 2:20-22.\textsuperscript{21} Additionally, while Hebrews 2:4-6 suggests apostles were identified by the miracles, this was not the sole purpose of the charismatic gifts, as cessationists would state. Gifts were also used for personal edification (1 Cor. 14:3), corporate edification (1 Cor. 12, 14), evangelism (Acts 9:32-43), expressing love and feelings of compassion (Mark 1:40-41), and edifying

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., loc. 3383.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., loc. 3395.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., loc. 3401.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., loc. 3407.
G-d (John 11:4). The most widely used passages of Scripture, being 1 Cor. 12 and 14, do not reference using gifts to validate authority of an apostle, using in laying the foundation, or spreading the Gospel.22

Continuationists do point out that while the gifts did die down in church history, at the same time, heretical practices such as baptism for salvation were in practice.23

In addition to Boyd’s assertions and MacArthurs statement of “complete,” other prominent theologians back up the correction interpretation of “complete” to mean “perfected,” and that there is no cessation in-between.24,25,26

Continuationists also state that the use of prophecy or tongues does not further any reason for an open canon, despite the abuse these gifts have received.27

The Charismatic View

In modern times, part of the heated discussion about the charismatic gifts is concerning the abuse of the gifts by the charismatic adherents. It is important to note that the concept of charismatic gifts (a noun) is simply divine inspiration.28 Within the charismatic viewpoint, the term is treated as a descriptor, or adjective, referring to the charismatic view/movement.29 One prominent figure for the charismatic movement is Benny Hinn. In

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22 Ibid., loc. 3413.
23 Ibid., loc. 3420.
27 Boyd and Eddy, loc. 3445.
28 s.v. "Google Dictionary."
29 Ibid.
his book, he tells of his personal convictions and experiences with the Holy Spirit, as one who not only uses biblical charismatic gifts, but extra-biblical gifts, which include persuasive and emotional healings, slaying in the “spirit,” and extreme prophetic words. Charismatics have also made themselves well-known as a “replacement” for Israel in G-d’s promises, which is entirely unbiblical.

Summary

This exposé has defined the four primary viewpoints of the charismatic gifts, using sources of staunch supporters. In this examination, two conclusions are immediately available: the charismatic view, not founded on any biblical support, is errant and inappropriate, and the complete cessationist view, mis-diagnosing the intent of Paul’s writings, is a brash attempt to avoid debate and lacking serious Scriptural authority, relying too much of church tradition and history, as well as assumption of meaning of Paul’s writings.

While the semi-cessationist viewpoint has strong Scriptural support, the continuationist viewpoint has, lacking better terminology, continuity that is not interrupted by modern philosophy or explanation.

It’s been suggested that if an individual were dropped off on an island with no theological knowledge, and only had the Bible avail, that the person would come to several conclusions: church is not the point - a relationship is. Within that relationship, G-d gives us gifts, and never fails His end of the covenant. Whether or not you, the reader, practice these gifts, they are nonetheless avail today.

