

No. 10. Cessationism – The End of the Miraculous Gifts

During the course of recent studies we have been stressing the truth of the sufficiency of Scripture, a major tenet of historic Biblical Christianity that was clarified and ratified at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Drawing their support and proof directly from the N.T. for their teaching that God's Word is sufficient, the Reformers embodied this truth in their creeds & confessions, giving the Christian Church a firm foundation on all matters of faith and practice.

For our purposes in this study the truth of the sufficiency of Scripture is of great importance. Since Scripture is sufficient then supernatural revelation has ceased, which means that the modes by which supernatural revelation was given have also ceased, including the Biblical miracle. This fact is what is meant by the term *Cessationism*. "Cessationism" is the belief that the *charismata*, the supernatural gifts of the apostolic church ceased with the conclusion of the Apostolic Church, and this was the belief of the churches of the Reformation.

In the course of Reformed Church history there have been various expositions of the classic Protestant position on *Cessationism*. But the fullest work was wrought by the Princeton theologian Dr. B.B. Warfield in a series of lectures on the subject, delivered in 1917 and then published in a book entitled *Counterfeit Miracles*.

With regard to the N.T., Warfield expounded the Scriptures to show that Christ wrought many miracles under the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. The Saviour then continued this exercise of supernatural power through His apostles, who also transmitted it to men like Stephen, Philip the Evangelist, Barnabas and others. For this reason, as Warfield put it, "*the apostolic church was characteristically a miracle-working church.*" However, as Warfield proceeded to show from both Church history and Scripture, miracle-working power passed away with the Apostles and those to whom they transmitted it. In his lectures Warfield quotes the conclusion of the renowned scholar, Bishop Kaye, who said: "*My conclusion then is that the power of working miracles was not extended beyond the disciples upon whom the apostles conferred it by the imposition of their hands.*" But it is from the Scriptures that Warfield really clinched his presentation of the cessationist position. He demonstrated two things:

(a) That the miracles of Christ & the apostles were exclusively confirmations of divine revelation

See Mark 16: 20, Acts 14: 3, Heb 2: 3, 4. Thus, Warfield showed from Scripture that the N.T. miracles belonged solely to a time of inspired revelation.

(b) Warfield showed that the N.T. testifies to the cessation of miracles as coinciding with the completion of its revelation.

The classic passage in this respect is 1 Cor 13: 8-13. In v.8 Paul teaches that the spiritual quality of "love" is enduring and would never cease or depart from the Church. However, Paul plainly states that the supernatural gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge would pass away, would cease. Thus, v.v. 8-12 are directed to the impermanence of miraculous gifts in the Church. These are the gifts mentioned in ch. 12: 8-10 as *prophecy, the word of knowledge & divers kinds of tongues*.

In v.10 he sets the time for this – "*when that which is perfect is come.*" Here then, is the basic premise of this whole passage – there would be a cessation of the supernatural gifts when the perfect would come. The vital question then hinges on what is meant by "*that which is perfect.*" The cessationist position is that the reference is to the close of the canon of Scripture. Those who oppose the cessationist position claim that "that which is perfect" in v.8 refers to heaven or the day of glorification. But it can be shown clearly that the reference to that which is *perfect* is not to the glorified state at all. Note the following:

1. First, note the meaning of the word *perfect*.

The word *perfect* denotes that which is mature. Note in v.11 how Paul illustrates and emphasises that this is the meaning of the word – the mature man puts away childish things or he leaves behind the immaturity that belongs to childhood. Then see ch. 14: 20 – here the word for *perfect* is translated "men". With regard to understanding God's people are to pursue maturity and not remain in a childish state. Then see also 2 Tim 3: 17 – here the word is employed again in the context of spiritual maturity. Thus, the meaning of the word *perfect* is exceedingly clear – it is indicative of maturity in contrast with immaturity.

However, note that in neither passage does *perfect* have in view the glorified man in heaven. Instead, the reference is to the man completely equipped for life in this world. The latter reference in 2 Tim 3: 17 is very striking. It points to the man of God made mature, not by supernatural gifts, but by the Word of God, that is by the mature & complete special revelation of God, the Scriptures acting & operating in his life.

2. Second, note that miraculous gifts are classified here by the Holy Spirit as belonging to the realm of the immature.

Read v.v. 8, 9 again and note that they not only will fail, cease and vanish away, but that they are only *in part*; i.e., immature as compared with the *perfect* that Paul says was yet to come.

This is very important. Pentecostals/charismatics teach that to employ the spiritual gifts is a sign of great spiritual maturity, yet the Spirit of God relegates such to the realm of the immature. Note the significance of this point – the amazing gifts catalogued in 1 Cor 12-14 are defined as belonging to the realm of the immature and to a temporary state or situation. But Paul's consolation to the Corinthian church is that something better was coming – the *perfect* or the mature was coming when the immature and the temporary would not be needed.

3. Paul's reference to the immature is essentially a reference to immature divine revelation.

Note that Paul is specifically dealing with revelatory gifts – *prophecies, tongues, & knowledge*. These gifts have to do with the delivery of divine revelation, as has been noted repeatedly from Scripture. Consequently, the clear inference is that the *perfect* of which he proceeds to speak must also belong to the realm of revelation – this is the logical conclusion that we draw.

Moreover, Paul's teaching is that the revelation given by means of these miraculous gifts is immature and only partial, v. 9. However, something better *in the realm of divine revelation* was coming, a mature & permanent revelation, actually – the complete canon of Scripture. Thus, in these verses Paul certainly points to a contrast. But it is not a contrast between miraculous gifts and heaven. Rather it is a contrast between lesser and greater revelation. The early Apostolic Church had miraculous gifts through which only a partial revelation was possessed. However, at a later time the Church would have the perfect revelation – the full canon of Scripture – and then there would be the cessation of the miraculous gifts.