

# Bible Answers about Continuing Spiritual Gifts for Your Non-Charismatic Friends

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By Jon Ruthven

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George could feel his face growing red and hot. He was embarrassed—utterly stymied and tongue-tied. His excited story about his recent filling with the Spirit and his healing was met with a long, Bible-based refutation by his pastor and friend.

“George,” he concluded, “the Bible says these experiences of yours cannot be valid. True miracles no longer occur today because God gave them only to establish New Testament doctrine. You can’t go against the teaching of God’s Word just because of your experiences and feelings.” The pastor continues, “‘Ordinary’ spiritual gifts like evangelism, hospitality and teaching, of course, continue, but the ‘miraculous’ gifts have ceased.”

George certainly did not need to be discouraged, however. These days, even among conservative Evangelical scholars, the tide is definitely turning against his pastor-friend’s “cessationism.” Cessationism is a doctrine, mostly found in Protestant fundamentalism, that spiritual gifts (the “*charismata*,” such as listed in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10, 28) existed only to prove the validity of New Testament doctrine or accredit the apostles. This teaching also says that the “miraculous” or “extraordinary” gifts died with the apostles, or with the writing of the last New Testament book sometime in the first century.

George needed a kind of pocket guide, like this article, for him to answer his friend’s overwhelming, Biblical-sounding arguments. This article will very briefly summarize an enormous Biblical case that can be made for spiritual gifts continuing today. The second part will examine the most common “cessationist” arguments George, and you, would likely hear.

## The Case for Continuing Spiritual Gifts

Before we begin, let us look at the central problem with the “cessationist” argument, above. It claims that *because* spiritual gifts can be used as *proof* of doctrine, then the gifts *must cease* when the need for that proof is fulfilled (that is, when the New Testament was written). Should a medical doctor use that same logic? When he uses your heartbeat to *prove* you are alive, does this mean your heart *must cease* beating simply because he just removed his stethoscope and no longer needed proof? It is highly doubtful that the New Testament ever intended spiritual gifts to be used as proof, but even if it did, the New Testament itself shows many *other, clearly-stated and necessary functions* for spiritual gifts, which, by the same logic, should demand their continuation!

Let us now review some passages of Scripture that makes this case.

### 1. Romans 11:29 makes a universal statement about the continuation of the “charismata.”

“The gifts [*charismata*] and calling of God are irrevocable [not called back].” Cessationism precisely contradicts this verse. Cessationists may object, though, that this verse applies only to the offer of salvation to the Jews and not to the gifts of the Spirit.

But here we must follow Paul’s logic: this promise of the irrevocable *charismata* is a statement of *universal truth*, a *generalization* of the continuation of the *charismata*. Paul *appeals* to this universal truth

against those who suggest that the offer of salvation to the Jews is no longer valid. Paul moves *from* this universal *to* the specific case, not the other way around. Hence, the “universal” is always true and may be appealed to in other ways, as in our case of specific spiritual gifts not being recalled.

Note further, “*charismata*” is a term which he applies elsewhere to all the so-called “temporary” or “miraculous” spiritual gifts (*e.g.*, Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:6). The full burden of proof lies on those who wish to change the meaning of the word to exclude frequently-named *charismata*: spiritual gifts of utterance and power.

This passage also teaches that just because people don’t accept God’s gifts, and because they don’t appear often in recorded history, does not prove that God has withdrawn them. Moreover, the “*charismata*” of the Romans 11 passage cannot simply be limited to “salvation,” since Paul saw Christ, the Messiah, as the one who bestows the gifts of the Spirit as much as the one who redeems from sin.

We now move from this general principle to another important principle about continuing spiritual gifts.

## **2. The New Testament says that spiritual gifts are not to be despised or neglected.**

1 Cor 12:21 says that no “member” (spiritual gift) of the body is allowed to say to another, ‘I have no need of you!’” But cessationism says exactly that. Cessationism also denies clear commands of the Bible: “Desire earnestly the best gifts” (12:31). “Eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy” (14:1) “Try to excel in gifts that build up the church [especially prophecy in the context]” (14:12). “Be eager to prophesy and do not forbid to speak in tongues” (14:39). Cessationism *does* “quench the Spirit.” and *does* “despise prophecy” (1 Thes 5:19-20) by denying it even exists. In contrast to cessationism, Paul encourages Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God” (1 Tim 1:6). Many commentators feel this is the gift of prophecy.

## **3. The Pentecost Principle: The gifts are given for the End Times.**

The New Testament teaches that since the ascension of Christ we are living in “the last days,” the time when the exalted Christ sends to the church *all* His spiritual gifts *until* His second coming.

When Peter at Pentecost describes what is happening, he says essentially, “Joel’s prediction about the Spirit being poured out, being expressed in prophecies, dreams and visions (revelation experiences), is *now* being fulfilled *in these last days*.” If the promise of Spirit-caused revelation in dreams, visions and prophecies is for *the last days*, then are we, almost 2,000 years after this event, now *earlier* than the “last days” of Peter’s time—a time when this prediction no longer applies? No. We, too, must be in the “last days,” at least until Jesus comes, and therefore these revelatory gifts are still promised for our time.

The following diagram (see p. 12) shows how we live in an overlapping time when we alternately experience both suffering and victory, uncertainty and knowledge—a time when we “know in part and prophesy in part,” awaiting the fullness of our inheritance in Christ.

The first coming of Jesus represented “D-Day” the decisive battle (properly at the resurrection) which rages on, with its sufferings, victories and defeats, toward its ultimate victory at “V-Day” (the second coming).

We now move to specific verses illustrating the Pentecost principle, above.

## **4. Many New Testament verses demonstrate that “miraculous” spiritual gifts continue to today.**

George’s friend assumed that charismatics had no Biblical grounds for their experiences. The following is a *long* section of verses showing that gifts of power and revelation have continued in the End Times (the “Pentecost Principle”). These New Testament passages show two elements: 1) the presence of identifiable *charismata*, which, 2) continue during this age, building up the church toward the (as yet unrealized) goal of its complete maturity when we are presented holy and blameless to God in Christ.

Before we can read these passages properly, we must, of course, get their vocabulary straight. First, numerous Biblical theologians have shown statistically that the divine “Spirit” as presented in Scripture is

associated *primarily* and *essentially* as performing charismatic operations (prophecies, miracles, *etc.*). Second, the same can be said of the term “power” (*dunamis*), which is not simply excitement or enthusiasm about salvation, but refers *in most New Testament contexts as miracle power*. Third, in the passages below, scholars can show that the terms, “wisdom,” “knowledge,” “word,” *etc.*, must be seen primarily as spiritual gifts operating.

Note also, that when Paul says he is praying for the readers’ involvement in the charismata (Eph 1:17; 3:14f; Phil 1:5-10; Col 1:9-12), we cannot believe that his prayer is an empty, hopeless gesture. However, if these gifts have ceased, then Paul’s prayers mean little more than “warm greetings.”

#### **a. 1 Corinthians 1:4-8**

“I always thank God for you because of God’s grace (including the whole range of charismata) because in *every way* you have been enriched in him—in *every* kind of speech (this must include prophecy) and in *every* kind of knowledge (including the gift of revealed knowledge). You are doing this now *exactly as* (*kathos*) the testimony of Christ *was* confirmed in you (that is, charismatically, by the apostles and/or evangelists who first demonstrated/articulated the gospel to you)—with the result that you do not *now* lack *any* spiritual gift *during the time you are awaiting* the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. (The Lord) will *also* (not merely when the gospel first came to you, or even only now, but will) *continue to confirm/strengthen* you (in the same way as you are now experiencing the charismata in the time you are “awaiting” the end) *until the end*, so that (via the strengthening and purifying charismata which generates growth and progressive maturity) you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

#### **b. 1 Corinthians 13:8-13**

“Love never ends: it continues on into the age to come. But wherever the charismatic operations of prophecies, tongues speaking or revealed knowledge occur, they will be ended. Like childhood, they all represent an incomplete, yet necessary stage of God’s eternal plan.

But when will these three (representative) gifts, (*i.e.*, the charismata) generally, cease? The principle is this: when the complete (end) arrives, at that precise point, the incomplete will be ended. Specifically, when Christ returns at the end of this present age, then, and not a moment before, the charismata—gifts of prophecy, tongues and revealed knowledge here offered as examples—which are incomplete compared to the ultimate heavenly realities they only now indicate, will all come to an end, having served their temporary purpose. Let us note four illustrations of this point.

First, when I was a baby (representing our present existence) I babbled, thought and reasoned (*i.e.*, the present charismata of speech and knowledge) like a baby—a necessary and positive development to be sure—all of which would be related to what was to come. But at adulthood (our existence in heaven), this stage is superseded by vastly greater powers of communication, thinking and reasoning.

Second, in the present age, the charismata only serve as indirect or indistinct perceptions of God or His will, like looking into a mirror or a photograph. But in heaven, the mirror or photograph (the charismata) are unnecessary if we can see God ‘face to face.’ At that point these items, which had helped preserve the somewhat distant relationship, will have served their purpose and will be discarded, since we will have the real person before us.

Third, in this present age, I know God, but the charismata reveal Him to me only in glimpses and hints. But then, in heaven, I will know (*kathos*) God exactly as, and to the same degree God knows me now. Of what use will be those tentative and imprecise gifts of revealed knowledge under those conditions?

(Fourth), in this present age, faith, hope and love, all three function, but like the other charismata, faith (which is a charism of revelation, which, if acted upon, can produce miracles or any other aspect of God’s salvation), and hope (another gift of God which is superseded if it results in the presence and reality of its object), will both be unnecessary because of their “waiting” characteristic; in heaven, the waiting will be over. By contrast, love is greater, because, unlike faith, hope and the other charismata, love never ends.”

#### **c. Ephesians 1:13-23**

In the context of believers' receiving "all wisdom and understanding" (1:8) and Paul's continued prayer for the same (1:17) and to experience ("know") "[Christ's] incomparably great power"—like that of the resurrection], Paul describes the time frame: "In him, when you believed, you were marked with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit [or first installment—the first payment of the *same* to follow] guaranteeing our inheritance (described, *inter alia* as "incomparably great," etc., *like* resurrection power in 1:19), *until* the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory." This state of affairs is active in believers and is paralleled to the exaltation of Christ which occurs "not only in the present age, but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:21-23, see also 2:6).

#### **d. Ephesians 3:14-21**

Paul's prayer is that the readers may "have power through the Spirit" that in love they "*may have power together with all the saints* [that must apply to *all* in the church] . . . to the goal that you may be *filled to the measure of all the fullness of God*. Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, *according to the power that is at work within us*, to Him be glory, *in the church* and in Christ Jesus, *throughout all generations* for ever and ever. Amen." See also Isaiah 59:21.

#### **e. Ephesians 4:11-13**

"[The ascended Christ] gave some apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (not to accredit the gospel or its bearers, but) for the perfecting of the saints toward the work of ministry, toward the building up of the body of Christ. [But for how long?] These gifts are distributed, in principle (v. 7) "to each" *until*—an ongoing process of distribution—the following standards are met, *i.e.*, that we *all*—every last person in the church—*arrive*: at the unity of the faith, at the *full* knowledge of the Son of God, into full, mature adulthood, that is, to the level of stature (maturity) of the fullness of Christ." Note: even Paul has not "attained" to this state (Phil 3:12). That level of spiritual maturity *for the whole church* can only happen in heaven, but the gifts are given *until then*.

#### **f. Ephesians 4:30**

With Eph 1:13-23 above, the time period of the Spirit's prophetic presence in the believer is restated: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God [an allusion to ignoring prophetic warning, likely a reference to Isa 63:10. See also Eph 4:29] with whom you were sealed [an ongoing mark of ownership and protection] *until* the day of redemption."

#### **g. Ephesians 5:15-19**

In the present evil days (characteristic of the time of the Messianic woes [see Mt 24:9-12; 1 Tim 3] preceding the second coming, don't be drunk on wine, but continue to "be filled with the Spirit (see also Jer 23:9; Amos 2:12; Acts 2:13,15; Lk 1:15). Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (*i.e.*, singing in tongues? 1 Cor 14:13-17)—perhaps representative of the whole range of charismatic/prophetic operations to continue during these "present evil days," that is, "the last days."

#### **h. Philippians 1:5-10**

"Christ who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. What work? sharing in God's grace (and imitating Paul, 3:17; 4:9—necessarily including the charismata (See Mt 28:20 "teaching them *all* that I have commanded you") in defending and confirming (a word in this context speaking of charismata, signs and wonders). And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and perception (charismata of revelation), so that you may be able to *discern* (a gift of the Spirit) what is best and may be pure and blameless *until* the day of Christ." This passage is very close to 1 Cor 1:4-8.

### **i. Colossians 1:9-12**

“We have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through *all* Spiritual wisdom and understanding (this *must include* revelatory gifts) . . . being strengthened with *all* power (must include charismata of healing, miracles). . . to build spiritual maturity, looking toward (though already provisionally experiencing) the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. Indeed we have already been brought into that kingdom.”

### **j. 1 Thessalonians 1:5-8**

The rabbi-disciple relationship of the New Testament period required that the disciples imitated not only the *words* of their rabbi, but his *deeds* (note that Jesus is frequently called “teacher,” “master,” or “rabbi”—all meaning “rabbi”). Based on that understanding this passage portrays the clear normative transmission of the gospel in “word *and deed*.” “Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power (*en dunamei*), with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction . . . . You became *imitators* of us and of the Lord . . . . And so (it follows) *you yourselves became models* to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.”

This passage, then, teaches that the gospel in word and deed, preaching and miracle-power, is *supposed to be* transmitted from generation to generation (see Isa 59:21)—all this with the goal of building Christian maturity until the end of this age.

### **k. 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12**

“For which—in an ongoing process toward the goal [that you will be counted worthy at the coming of Christ] we constantly pray for you that our God will count you worthy and may fulfill your every good purpose *and every work of faith in power* (Greek, *en dunamei*)—*all the charismata*, so that the name of our Lord Jesus might be glorified in you and you in him.”

### **l. 1 Peter 1:5**

“Through faith you are being shielded by God’s [miracle] power (*en dunamei*), *until* a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time.”

### **m. 1 Peter 4:7-12**

“The end of all things [the goal and context of this warning] is near. . . . Each one should use whatever spiritual gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks—as the oracles of God.” Most commentators see this as a reference to New Testament prophecy. The teaching is given against the approaching end, with the understanding that prophecy is to be operative up until that point.

### **n. 1 John 2:26-28**

As an antidote to false prophets, John encourages the gift of prophecy: “Dear children, *this is the last hour* . . . . But *all of you have an anointing* from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth . . . . As for you, the anointing you received from Him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as His anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in Him . . . . continue in Him, so that when He appears we may be confident and unashamed before Him at His coming.” This passage is strikingly parallel to the promise of the Paraclete to the apostles (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13f). Here the promise is to the general readers! Again, today we cannot be *earlier* than the “last hour” when this promise is offered.

### **o. Jude 18-21**

[As Jesus prophesied] “*In the last times*. . . there will be those who follow their own human desires, and who do not have the Spirit. By contrast, you, beloved, during these same ‘last times,’ *edify* yourselves in your most holy faith by *praying in the Spirit*.”

“Praying in the Spirit” is praying in response to the direct leading of the Spirit—a revelatory process. It also means praying in glossolalia (tongues speaking). 1 Cor 14:4,14,15 speaks of this where it says that the “one who *prays in the Spirit edifies* himself.”

## Conclusion

Each of these passages, then, continues the pattern of Jesus’ commissions to his disciples to demonstrate/articulate the Kingdom in the power of the Spirit—to the 12, the 70 (72), the 120—numbers that may serve symbolically for “all of the Lord’s people” (including the readers of these verses) whom Moses wished would all be filled with the Spirit of prophecy instead of it being used “jealously” for accreditation of leaders (Num 11:29; cf., Isa 59:21; Joel 2:28-30; 1 Cor 14:1,5,39).

Bottom line: cessationism teaches that since the function of the “miraculous” or “revelatory” spiritual gifts was to accredit the doctrine of the New Testament, then no more such gifts can now occur. But the New Testament itself nowhere says that spiritual gifts are to accredit New Testament doctrine or establish the canon of Scripture. The New Testament *is explicit*, however, about the gifts’ other functions: “for the common good,” to reveal secrets of the heart, to convict sinners, to cause worship of God, to exhort, encourage, and edify (1 Cor 14).

Most cessationists believe that the “non-miraculous” spiritual gifts continued: hospitality, helps, administration, evangelism, pastoring, teaching, *etc.* On the other hand, the “miraculous” gifts had to cease because they accredited new doctrine. Besides creating an artificial and unbiblical distinction among spiritual gifts, this teaching confuses the sufficiency of doctrine with the *means by which* that doctrine is communicated. Just as inspired preaching *applies* the gospel to the hearers’ spiritual needs but does not add to the Scripture, so the same for the gift of prophecy. Just as the gift of hospitality *expresses* the gospel in physical ways, but does not add content to Christian doctrine, in the same way a gift of healing.

*Neither* the “non-miraculous” *nor* the “miraculous” gifts *add* anything to the content of the gospel; they are simply means to communicate the gospel, whether in word or in deed. Spiritual gifts do not *prove* the Gospel, so much as they *are* the Gospel!

So George doesn’t need to be tongue-tied. He has some great resources to help him in his dialogues with his non-charismatic friends. These include: Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*, 1994 and *Surprised by the Voice of God*, Zondervan, 1996. Gary Greig and Kevin Springer, eds., *The Kingdom and the Power: Are Healing and the Spiritual Gifts Used by Jesus and the Early Church Meant for the Church Today?* (Gospel Light, 1993). Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) and Wayne Grudem, ed., *Are Miracles for Today: Four Views* (Zondervan, 1996).

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*See Also by Dr. Ruthven:*

## **Answering the Cessationists' Case Against Continuing Spiritual Gifts**

Some of the arguments Dr. Ruthven will answer:

- “History shows that spiritual gifts ceased.”
- “If miracles and spiritual gifts have continued, then why don't we see them today?”
- “Ephesians 2:20 shows that the ‘foundational gifts’ of apostle and prophet have ceased.”
- “1 Corinthians 13:8-10 teaches that spiritual gifts cease when the canon of Scripture is established and/or the church is matured.”

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