

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

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The Gifts of the Holy Spirit by Bob DeWaay

“And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly.”
(Romans 12:6a)

“So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church.”
(1Corinthians 14:12)

Have the gifts ceased? Many have argued “yes.” They reason that the completion of the canon of the New Testament (the written form of the apostles’ teaching) makes spiritual gifts superfluous. Since the apostles have died and the canon is closed we do not need spiritual gifts. Others have argued “no,” the presence of spiritual gifts indicates a new work of God that places certain Christians into a higher spiritual category than ordinary Christians. Both of these teachings are false because they are based on a misunderstanding of the purpose of spiritual gifts.

The misunderstanding is that spiritual gifts “fill in” missing revelation. In other words, spiritual information that is not available through ordinary means can be accessed through the gifts of the Spirit. This argument as used by some cessationists,¹ is that spiritual gifts temporarily filled in truth about Christ and His word that had not yet been written by the Apostles. For example, Walter Chantry writes, “Hence, stop-gap revelations were given to edify the church while the Holy Ghost brought all things of Christ to the remembrance of the Apostles [John 14:26].”² Others who believe in the gifts **but abuse them** also claim that the gifts of the Spirit bring new revelations, in their case extra-Biblical revelations that go beyond what was written by the Apostles.³

I will defend a third position — that

the gifts of the Spirit did not cease, but their purpose is not to bring extra-biblical revelations to the church. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to the church to edify the body of Christ and to cause every member to be an important and useful part of the body. To this end the so-called “revelatory” gifts are for “edification, exhortation and consolation” (1Corinthians 14:3). This does not mean predicting the future or bringing spiritual information to the church that was not written in the Bible.

Arguments that the Gifts have Ceased

The theory that gifts of the Spirit have ceased is based on two ideas. One is that the Bible predicts that the gifts would cease. The other is that the purposes of the gifts were only to validate the presence of true Apostles and to fill in revelation until the canon of the New Testament was completed. Both of these premises are false, as we shall see.

That spiritual gifts validated the presence of Apostles whose teaching is authoritative is indeed true, but it does not exhaust the purpose of the gifts. God’s powerful works through the New Testament Apostles were far greater than the manifestation of spiritual gifts. Their credentials as true Apostles also involved having met the resurrected Christ and having received their teaching from Him. Paul claimed to have seen the risen Lord and received his apostolic teaching from Christ Himself.⁴ It is true that the Apostles were given the task of writing the New Testament, that their ministries were validated in many ways including the presence of signs and wonders, and that the canon of Scripture is complete. Yet this in itself does not prove that after 100 AD there are no more gifts of the Holy Spirit.

1Corinthians 13:8-10 When the Perfect Comes

The following passage is the basis for the claim that the Bible predicts that the gifts would cease after the death of the Apostles:

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. (1Corinthians 13:8-10).

Cessationists interpret “the partial” to mean the incomplete revelation available through the gifts while the Apostles finished writing the New Testament and “the perfect” to mean the completed canon of scripture.⁵ However, the context shows that Paul is contrasting the temporary and provisional nature of “gifts” with the eternal nature of *agapē* love. Chapter 13 is about love as a necessary but missing foundation in a situation where the gifts were being abused. The Corinthians believed that gifts confirmed the presence of a superior spirituality in certain persons. Not the case, says Paul. The gifts are for building up the body of Christ, not exalting one over another. If the Corinthians were operating in the love of Christ they would have been concerned about the welfare of others, not selfishly parading their own spirituality before the church hoping for glory in the eyes of others.

1Corinthians 13 is not a chapter about the completion of the New Testament canon. Instead, Paul is discussing *agapē* love — something we have now that will endure even into the age to come. In **1Corinthians 13:12**, he contrasts “now” and “then”: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known.” Paul (who had many revelations from God and wrote much of the New Testament) was not saying that his partial knowledge would be changed to full knowledge if he lived long enough for the canon to be available in written form. He was saying that “then” he will “know” and “[have been] fully known.” Clearly the object of Paul’s knowledge is capable of also “knowing” him. The written canon

of Scripture cannot be said to fully know Paul. It is Christ who Paul now knows and then will know fully.

Consider what the Apostle John says about this: “*Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is*” (1John 3:2). What now is as seeing “*in a mirror dimly*” shall be completed when we see “*face to face*.” This personal, relational knowledge that is characterized by love and completed at a future date is nothing less than the knowledge of Christ. He fully knows us now, but when we see Him face to face our partial understanding will be completed, matured, perfected. Charles Hodge comments on 1Corinthians 13:9,10: “This is the reason why knowledge and prophecy are to cease. They are partial and imperfect, and therefore suited only to an imperfect state of existence. The revelations granted to the prophets imparted mere glimpses of the mysteries of God; when those mysteries stand disclosed in the full light of heaven, what need then of those glimpses?”⁶

Another approach as been to claim that tongues would cease at the time of the completed canon, but knowledge and prophecy would not. This is based on the fact that different Greek words are used in verse 8 for “cease” and “be done away.” The implication is that Paul was teaching that tongues would end at a different time than prophecy and knowledge. This too is a strained interpretation that puts an issue on the table that Paul is not addressing. Paul is comparing the permanence of love with the temporary nature of gifts. Prophecy, knowledge, and tongues were discussed in 1Corinthians 12 as gifts. The contrast of these gifts with love is introduced in chapter 13; but he does not elaborate on the nature and use of various gifts until chapter 14. The change in verbs in 1Corinthians 13:8 is merely rhetorical.⁷ Tongues, knowledge (of the provisional type) and prophecy that are now gifts of the Spirit will be unnecessary when the giver of the Holy Spirit and His gifts shall be seen face to face.

The Gifts no Longer Needed?

The second aspect of the argument

that the gifts have ceased is the claim that there is no longer any need for them. If they only served to validate the presence of true Apostles and fill in missing revelation, then with the death of the Apostles and the completion of the written New Testament, there would be no need for the gifts of the Spirit. A search of the passages which teach about the gifts of the spirit will determine if this is true.

One particular example causes huge problems for those who believe this theory — that of Paul himself — “*I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all*” (1Corinthians 14:18). Assume for a moment that the cessationist theory is true, the gift of tongues (and other such gifts) either validate apostolic authority or serve as stop-gap revelation for churches that lack a completed New Testament. Why, then, did Paul speak in tongues? Surely he did not need to hear himself speak in tongues to be reassured that he was an apostle, he was quite sure of that fact.

Therefore, if the cessationists are right, Paul must have spoken in tongues to fill in missing revelation for himself. However, this presents a problem since Paul claimed to have gotten his apostolic teaching from Christ Himself (Galatians 1:11-24; 1Corinthians 15:1-8) who called him to teach the truths of the gospel to others. Paul did not speak in tongues at Christian gatherings, but in private (1Corinthians 14:19). Paul taught in this same chapter that the one who speaks in a tongue, which would include him, does not speak to men but to God: “*For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries*” (1Corinthians 14:2). I believe that the “no one” who understands includes the speaker himself. Otherwise why would Paul tell these Christians not to speak in tongues in the church unless there was an interpreter or pray that he himself might interpret (1Corinthians 14:5,13). The reason is that neither the speaker in tongues or the others present can understand it, that is the point of much of 1Corinthians 14.

There is no reason to believe that Paul understood his own speaking in tongues. Listen to what he said: “*For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my*

mind is unfruitful.” (1Corinthians 14:14). This being the case, how could Paul’s speaking in tongues, which he did in private, have filled in missing revelation? He told us that he did not understand the words.

Therefore, the cessationist theory fails. It claims that the gift of tongues (and other charismatic gifts) only validated apostolic authority and/or filled in missing revelation. But here is a case that does neither, so the theory is false. There are other purposes for gifts. It turns out that these other purposes are not logically bound to the existence of living first century apostles. The Bible does not teach that spiritual gifts would cease before the return of Christ and does not teach that they only validate apostles and fill in missing revelation. The primary passages that talk about the “*charismata*” (the Greek word translated “gifts” in key passages such as 1Corinthians 12:4,9,28,30,31 and Romans 12:6) have to do with the edification of the body of Christ.

The Biblical Purpose for Gifts

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are to benefit the body of Christ — this is often repeated in the passages that talk about them. Many people who believe in the gifts engage in practices that do more harm than good to the body. This shows that their teaching and practice are not Biblical; but this does not prove that the gifts have ceased. Many people seriously misunderstand what our greatest needs are. They assume that our need is secret information, new revelations, predictions of the future, or perhaps a raucous “worship” experience. All of these actually serve to hurt the body of Christ. What we need is to be conformed to the image of Christ.

When Paul teaches about the mutual benefit of the body, we need to understand him in his own context. Paul taught that the ultimate purpose, benefit, and hope of the church was that we would grow up “in Him” and be prepared as a spotless bride for Christ. Consider just a few of the many passages about this:

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful

scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:14-16)

Every instance where Paul gives extended teaching about the *charismata* he emphasizes the importance of each member of the body. This is the case in Romans 12: “*For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*” (Romans 12:4,5). Verse 6 then uses the term *charismata*.

Even more striking in this regard is the teaching found in **1 Corinthians 12**. After describing a number of gifts, Paul writes: “*But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills*” (1 Corinthians 12:11). The *charismata* have nothing to do with an elite group of spiritual people who, having been uniquely gifted above others, become the focus of attention. Nothing could be more foreign to the Biblical teaching on spiritual gifts than for some people to claim special anointings that make everyone else dependent on them. If indeed someone seems to be superior as far as spiritual gifting is concerned, such a one must adopt an attitude of humility and service, esteeming others as better than himself. If some seem to have less outwardly dramatic gifts, perhaps considering themselves lacking in many ways, those persons ought to be esteemed all the higher by the rest of the body.

Here is the Biblical teaching on this: *On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body, which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly members come to have more abundant seemliness, whereas our seemly members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body,*

giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.

(1 Corinthians 12:22-25)

Sadly, in our day God works through a person in a powerful way, such a one is likely to find every stage available and promote himself as God’s great man of power. Such claims evidence the carnality and lack of concern for Christ’s flock that really are motivating him. Simon the magician wanted spiritual gifts for this purpose and was sharply rebuked by Peter (Acts 8). Today he would be flown all around the world and given a TV show.

The purpose of the gifts is to benefit the entire body of Christ, not to create an elite group of super-saints who everyone else supposedly needs, but who need nothing from the rest of us but our money. I disagreed with Walter Chantry earlier in his contention that the gifts have ceased. On this point, however, I agree with him. The chapter in his book, *Signs of the Apostles*, entitled “When the Spirit Comes” has many good things to say.⁸ Among them is the fact that the Holy Spirit calls us to holiness and truth.

Also, the Spirit comes upon ordinary people, often with many weaknesses and sufferings, and uses them to God’s glory. So much that has come to us under the banner of “Charismatic” has been so crass, shallow, man-centered, and unbiblical that it is no wonder that many have decided that these gifts are not from God. The true work of the Spirit is to conform us to the image of Christ. Christ did not come to earth to get rich, avoid suffering, and exalt Himself before the masses for the purpose of vainglory. Building up the body of Christ is the purpose of the *charismata*. If that is not happening, Charismatics have little answer to the critics.

Conversely, where God’s Word is honored, new revelations are rejected, the doctrine of Christ is accurately taught, holiness is practiced, and members of the body are cared for and encouraged, a genuine work of God is taking place. If we reject such a work because spiritual gifts are present we do a damaging disservice to Christ’s flock.

If we declare the work of the Holy Spirit in giving gifts to the church to be ended and then write off all who receive certain gifts as horribly deceived, we lack the loving concern for the body of Christ that these passages teach. There has been error on both sides of this issue.

The Gifts and Biblical Truth

One of the objections to the gifts of the Spirit is that they are “revelatory” and thus of no purpose after the New Testament was completed. Let us consider two of the more prominent gifts, tongues and prophecy, in light of this objection. Paul wrote about these gifts:

For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. (1 Corinthians 14:2-4)

Paul’s definition of tongues and prophecy does not view them as adding revelation beyond the teachings of Christ and the apostles. Paul had written earlier in this epistle, “*not to exceed what is written*” (1 Corinthians 4:6b). Already they had received the true gospel of Christ and the truth from the apostles, plus the already completed Old Testament scriptures. They needed no new revelations, they badly needed to walk obediently in the ones they already received.

The person speaking in tongues is speaking to God, Paul said. Clearly, in this case, new revelations are not being given or received. I have always assumed that the edification for himself that a tongues speaker receives involves the fact that he is praying in the Spirit to God according to God’s purposes. Chantry and before him Hodge believe that the tongues speaker understands what he is saying, though his hearers do not.⁹ They cannot believe that any personal edification could ensue from words spoken in an unknown language. In response I refer to **Romans 8:26,27**: *And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself*

intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. In this case, cognitive understanding of the details is lacking, yet benefit is coming to the Spirit indwelt believer who thus “groans” with the Holy Spirit’s longings for God’s purposes. If this is spiritually edifying, though lacking cognitive grasp of the details, why cannot speaking in tongues to God be the same? This appears to be what Paul is teaching. No “new” revelation is thus imparted to the believer or the church.

Prophecy does sound like the impartation of divine revelations. Since the word gains a lot of connotation from the Old Testament prophets, some assume that it means predicting the future, announcing God’s decrees of judgement, or giving new revelations akin to scripture. But this is not what Paul said about prophecy as one of the *charismata*. It is for edification, exhortation, and comfort. Objectors will say that the Scripture already gives us these, so we need no prophecy. It is true that the Scriptures provide to those who know Christ, “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2Peter 1:3). This does not mean we need no teaching, guidance or exhortation.

Consider the fact that **Romans 12:6** uses the term *charismata* to list gifts such as “service, teaching, and exhorting” as well as prophecy. Would the same critics argue that we do not need teaching because the Bible already contains all the teaching God is going to give the church? We teach because the Bible is not only a large book dealing with many issues, but the Bible needs to be applied and understood by every generation in every situation. The preaching and teaching of God’s word is a gift of God’s grace which must adhere to the boundaries drawn out in Scripture. Prophecy ought to be understood in the same light, since Paul also mentions it in **Romans 12**. By God’s grace, His people are encouraged, exhorted and comforted by reference to Scriptural truths applied to a given gathering of believers.

Prophecy need not be set off with the saying “thus saith the Lord,” to be valid. Perhaps that phrase better fits the reading of a scripture, which we know is from God. Prophecy can easily reference scripture, such as someone speaking out that the Holy Spirit wants the congregation to take seriously the

command to love God and neighbor. That is exhortation. If the content is Biblical and the application godly, reasonable, and timely, one ought not “despise prophetic utterances” (1Thessalonians 5:20). Paul said that the speaker in tongues, “speaks unto God” and Paul allowed speaking in tongues in the congregation only if there was an interpreter. This gives the sense that Spirit led utterances, such as prophecy, can be in the form of prayer to God. Some Biblical prophecy takes this form.

Prophecy, as a gift of the Spirit, does not add to revelation — to the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3), or predict the future. Jesus said, “*But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance*” (Mark 13:23). He said this in the context of a warning about false prophets. What God is going to do has already been written in Scripture, it is not waiting to be announced by later day prophets. Much of the objection against the gifts is fueled by misuse of these gifts by people who claim to have a superior spirituality. Their concern is often self-exaltation and not the welfare of the body that Paul urges.

Conclusion

The only remedy for error and confusion is solid Biblical instruction. When controversy causes dissent, schisms, and confusion, we must be careful to weigh the facts, study the pertinent passages, and agree to follow the truth. In the case of the present work of the Holy Spirit, the truth is too important to be set aside by partisan prejudice that refuses to look at evidence. There have been errors and un-Christlike attitudes on both sides of this issue. May God work by His Spirit to bring us into conformity to His eternal purposes in Christ.

Written by Bob DeWaay
Twin City Fellowship
P.O. Box 8068
Minneapolis, MN 55408; © 1998
www.twincityfellowship.com/cic
612-874-7484

End Notes

1. I use this term to designate those who believe that spiritual gifts ceased to

exist after roughly 100 AD.

2. Walter J Chantry, *Signs of the Apostles — Observations on Pentecostalism Old and New*, (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle PA, 1973) 1993 edition, 39.

3. Some may object to this by pointing out that Paul uses the term “revelation” in 1Corinthians 14:6 & 26, 30. In Verse 6, Paul is speaking hypothetically about himself, “if I speak to you by way of revelation,” illustrating the need to speak in known languages when speaking to the church. This hardly licenses the Corinthians to write a new Bible with personal revelations beyond the teaching of Christ and His apostles. In Verse 30, the “revelation” to a member of the congregation who would “prophecy” is said in verse 31 to be for exhortation. This agrees with Paul’s definition of congregational prophecy in 14:3. “Revelation” in verse 26 is logically linked to the discussion in verse 30, so the same applies to it. Also, the term “prophet” in 1Corinthians 14 is functional terminology meaning “one who prophesies” not an ecclesiastical office in the church. See Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 694, 69.

4. see **1Corinthians 15:3-8; 1Corinthians 9:1** and also **2Corinthians 12:12** where Paul claim that “signs, wonders and miracles” validated his apostolic calling.

5. Chantry, *Signs*, 50,51.

6. Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1857 reprint1980) 272.

7. Gordon Fee, *Corinthians*; 642, n. 17.

8. Chantry, *Signs*, 96-115. I disagree with Chantry’s idea that tongues must be understood by the speaker to be valid, but agree with much of his critique of what’s wrong with modern practices among those claiming to have a special status vis-a-vis the Holy Spirit. Charismatics and Pentecostals would do well to read Chantry’s book and disagree with him where they must, but take many of his insights to heart. I agree with him that the canon is closed, that there no longer are apostles and prophets of the Biblical type, and that there are no “new revelations.” However, that much was taught to me at a Pentecostal Bible College.

9. op. cit. Hodge, *Corinthians*, commentary on chapter 14:1-20; 276-292. Though Hodge manages to make his argument sound plausible given possible ways to translate the Greek that are different from most English versions, I still

disagree. I think it is best to take Paul as saying that the one speaking in tongues speaks mysteries to God, his understanding is unfruitful, and he is praying in his spirit, well at that, but does not understand the words. It was not apparent in any of the passages in Acts that tongue speakers understood their own words, though on one occasion some others did.