

The Doctrine of Cessationism

Introduction

As we look broadly across evangelicalism today, most people believe the Holy Spirit is presently active in the church and that He is now working in the lives of individual Christians. Most people believe that the Spirit acts upon sinners to regenerate them, and that He acts within Christians to sanctify them. Most believe that the Spirit also gives spiritual gifts to the members of Christ's body. There is general agreement on those issues.

However, one issue where there is serious disagreement is whether the Holy Spirit gives *miraculous* gifts to Christians today. Many claim that He does, going so far as to say that you are not a true Christian unless you have spoken in tongues. Others argue that the Holy Spirit is *not* giving miraculous gifts to Christians today, and that He has not done so since approximately the end of the first century, when the last apostle (John) died.

This latter view is called *cessationism*, since it argues that miraculous gifts have *ceased*, in the language of 1 Corinthians 13.8.

What is a Miracle?

Today we hear many who define a miracle as anything that causes us to stop and acknowledge God's intervention in our ordinary human lives. So we may hear people calling things like sunsets, the budding of a rose, the birth of a baby, or even finding a needed piece of clothing on the sales rack a miracle. Some believe "miracles" are around us every day, claiming that our life and breath are miracles of God's creative thought. While the hearts of those who believe these things are sincere, these ideas, when measured by Biblical teaching, are misleading and false.

Biblically, miracles are a quite narrow and specific kind of divine activity. Not every act of God is a miracle. While all miracles are supernatural events, not all supernatural events are a miracle.

General Providence

These are things that happen the way they do because of the way God created the world. They are things that God mostly allows to happen on their own. These are the forces of nature and free-will beings. Events that happen as the result of unaided natural law and human free-will choices are not caused by God, except indirectly insofar as He is the one who created this system to begin with. Such events are neither miraculous or supernatural. Acts of nature, sunsets, and department store sales are in this category ... as far away from true miracles as can be.

Supernatural, but Non-Miraculous Events

Acts of Special Providence

These are the occasions when God intervenes in the course of nature and the flow of history, usually in ways that are so subtle that no one will actually observe or recognize them as supernatural. They generally occur within the boundaries of natural law and do not violate natural law but are nonetheless events that would not have happened without God's special causation. An example is the healing of a sick person in answer to prayer, James 5.16. This is something that still happens today, but it is not a miracle because from our perspective the healing process usually conforms to natural laws.

Supernatural Spiritual Events

This category includes the main redemptive works associated with Jesus: His incarnation, atonement, and enthronement at God's right hand. It includes the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. It includes works of salvation applied to us as individuals: forgiveness, regeneration, the Spirit's continuing indwelling. Strictly speaking these are not miracles, because they are outside the realm of the physical and thus cannot be observed by our senses. They are definitely supernatural, however.

Supernatural, Miraculous Events

Miracles are unlike supernatural spiritual events because they are visible acts occurring on the level of the physical. Also, they are unlike acts of special providence because they are obviously contrary to natural law. For example, instead of a gradual healing brought about in answer to prayer, a miracle is an immediate healing of a lame or blind man. The reason why miracles must be visible events obviously contrary to natural law has to do with their *purpose*, which is to serve as *proof* or evidence of the truth of the claimed revelatory explanation of God's redemptive works.

Another distinction between miracle and the previous categories is that a miracle is performed by a human agent, i.e., by someone empowered by God to work miracles (cf. the Spirit's gift of "*the working of miracles*," 1 Corinthians 12.10). A miracle happens when a *miracle-worker* deliberately channels the supernatural power of God in a way that produces a visible, physical event that could not have been produced by natural law.

The Case Against Miraculous Gifts Today

The Purpose of Miracles

New Testament Terminology

There are three main words in the New Testament regarding miracles. One is *dunamis*, the word for "power." It is often translated simply as "miracle." This word emphasizes the source of a miracle, namely God's divine power. A second word is *teras*, usually translated "wonder." It emphasizes the immediate *result* of a miracle, i.e., that it produces amazement and wonder. The third word is *semeion*, usually translated as "sign." This word tells us the purpose of a miracle, namely, to function as a sign (proof, confirmation, evidence) of something.

A Sign or Proof of Something

Proof of what? At the most fundamental level, when a person uses divine power to enact an event that could not have resulted from natural causes, that is proof that this person is acting on behalf of God. Such a miracle authenticates the *person* as being from God.

Jesus' miracles likewise served the purpose of authenticating Him as being sent from God:

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know.

– Acts 2:22

An example is His healing of the paralytic, Mark 2.1-12. He first forgave the man's sins, v.5, an implicit claim to deity, v. 7. Then He declared before all, especially the skeptics, *But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*, v.10—then He healed the man, v. 11-12. *So that you may know* sums up the purpose of all miracles.

The apostles' ability to work miracles proved that they too were divinely sent. In defending his apostolic authority Paul said:

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles,

– 2 Corinthians 12.12

This summary by B.B. Warfield is notable:

In the apostolic age, miracles were distinctively the authentication of the Apostles. They were part of the credentials of the Apostles as the authoritative agents of God in founding the church.⁸²

Miracles confirm not only that a *person* has been sent from God, but also that his *message* is from God. This is indeed the ultimate purpose of a miracle, i.e., the miracle is a sign or evidence that the miracle-worker's message comes from God and is therefore true and authoritative. This connection between the miracle and the message is crucial.

Miracles always are designed to authenticate the human instrument God has chosen to declare a specific revelation to those who witness the miracle. They were not simply divine exhibitionism; they substantiated and authenticated the prophets' claim that they spoke for God.⁸³

So we see that miracles are inseparable tied with prophetic revelation *and* with God's great redemptive events. There is a threefold package of interlocking components: God empowers individuals to work *miracles*, which are signs from God to confirm the *revelation* spoken by the miracle-workers; and the revelation is necessary to promise and to explain the great *redemptive works* of God.

This threefold package explains why miraculous gifts are not given simply at random in the history of redemption, but seem to be clustered around three main eras: the time of Moses and Joshua, when God delivered His people from Egyptian bondage; the time of Elijah and Elisha, representing the prophets whom God sent to explain His continuing intervention in the history of Israel; and the time of Jesus and

⁸² Warfield, p. 6.

⁸³ MacArthur, *Chaos*, p. 138.

the apostles, when God's climactic and final works of redemption were accomplished. It has been suggested that each of these three miracle-working eras lasted about 70 years.⁸⁴

The Laying on of Apostle's Hands

Another reason for denying the presence of miraculous gifts in the church today is the connection between one's receiving miraculous gifts and having an apostle's hands laid on him. This connection is established by the events recorded in the book of Acts.

In the earliest days of the church, though thousands were being baptized and thus were receiving the indwelling presence of the Spirit as promised, Acts 2.38-41; 4.4; 5.14, 32, only the apostles are said to be performing miracles, Acts 2.43; 3.6; 4.33; 5.12-16. Only after the apostles laid their hands on the seven servants in Acts 6:1-6 do we have a record of anyone else—two of the seven—working miracles (Stephen, 6:8; Philip, 8:6-7, 13).

The necessary connection between miraculous gifts and the laying-on of apostles' hands is clearly seen in Philip's ministry in Samaria in Acts 8. Though Philip was working miracles (after the apostles laid hands on him in Acts 6), and though many were being converted, none of the converts was given miracle-working power until the apostles Peter and John came down from Jerusalem "*and prayed for them that might receive the Holy Spirit,*" v. 15. Though they had surely received the indwelling of the Spirit at their baptism, since that was God's general Pentecost promise, Acts 2:38-39; 5:32, the Spirit had "*not yet fallen upon any of them,*" v. 16, in a miracle-giving way. Then the apostles "*began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit,*" v. 17.

At this point a converted sorcerer named Simon "*saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands.*" This so impressed him that he tried to purchase this apostolic power with money, and thus experienced a fall from grace, vs. 18-24. The result of the laying-on of the apostles' hands could not have been the normal indwelling of the Spirit, since God had already promised this in baptism, and especially since the laying-on of hands resulted immediately in something that Simon *saw*, something that was so spectacular that it led Simon to covet the power to bestow it, at the risk of his salvation, v. 18-19. It must have been a manifestation of miraculous abilities, especially speaking in tongues.

Concerning this Warfield writes:

This is not only a very instructive one in itself, but may even be looked upon as the cardinal instance of the conferring of miraculous gifts only by the laying-on of apostles' hands. Indeed, "it could not be more emphatically stated that the Holy Ghost was conferred by the laying on of the hands, specifically of the Apostles, and of the Apostles alone.... And there can be no question that it was specifically the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit that were" at stake here, and not His indwelling presence. Thus this passage is important to us, "to teach us the source of the gifts of power, in the Apostles, apart from whom they were not conferred." This "connection of the supernatural gifts with the Apostles is so obvious that one wonders that so many students have missed it"⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Baxter, *Gifts*, p. 134-138.

⁸⁵ Warfield, p. 22-23.

There must have been a necessary connection between such miraculous manifestations and the laying-on of apostles' hands. The only two recorded exceptions to this are Pentecost and Cornelius, on which occasions the Spirit was poured out directly because of the need for a special kind of sign. Peter's words in Acts 11:15 suggest that what happened to Cornelius and his family, Acts 10:44–48 had not happened since Pentecost itself. That is, no one else had prophesied or spoken in tongues without the laying-on of apostles' hands.

This leads to the conclusion that the bestowing of miraculous gifts must have ceased around 100 AD, when John, the last apostle, died.

For Thought and Reflection

1. What is a major source of division among evangelicals today regarding gifts of the Spirit?
2. What is the doctrine of Cessationism?
3. What is *general providence*?
4. What is an example of a super-natural but non-miraculous event?
5. What is an example of a super-natural spiritual event?
6. What is an example of a supernatural miraculous event?
7. What was the purpose of miracles, signs, and wonders?

