

Theological distinctives # 5
Have the sign gifts ceased?

1. Introduction

- a. Let's go back to the first century.
 - i. It is a hot, dry, and dusty day in Jerusalem.
 - ii. As Peter and John walk down the street they see a crippled man.
 - iii. Moved by compassion, they stop and pray for him.
 - iv. He is instantly healed on the spot.
 - v. Everyone is amazed—word spreads fast, and a large crowd gathers.
- b. Not wanting to waste an opportunity, Peter preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ with great boldness and specificity.
 - i. As a result, 5,000 people are converted on the spot.
 - ii. When the religious authorities get news of what happened, they are not happy. As a result, they arrest Peter and John and throw them in Jail.
- c. The next day they are dragged out of jail and put on trial...
 - i. The religious leaders realize that they can't do much because the man Peter and John healed is standing right next to them...
 - ii. So, they sternly warn the disciples to stop talking about Jesus and then they let them go...
- d. After they are let the disciples go, the disciples pray....
- e. Here is their prayer.
 - i. **Acts 4:29–31 (ESV) — 29** And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, **30** while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." **31** And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.
- f. Why do I tell this story?
- g. This text raises an important question. Here is the question, can we or should we pray the same prayer? In other words, should we pray for God to perform signs and wonders today???? Or were these manifestations of the Holy Spirit only for the 1st century church?
- h. The elders of GCF think we should pray this prayer. In other words, we think that all of the gifts of the Spirit described in the NT are available for us today.
 - i. This brings us to our fifth sermon on our theological distinctives series.

- i. The authority of Scripture
 - ii. Gospel centrality
 - iii. Reformed theology
 - iv. Complementarity
 - v. Continuist pneumatology
- j. Qualifications...
- i. These sign gifts are not the most important thing that the Spirit does.
 - ii. Furthermore, you don't have to agree with us on this topic to be a member at GCF...
 - iii. Yet, believing that these gifts are for today, makes us somewhat distinct.
- k. Before I make a case that all the gifts mentioned in the NT are available today, I need to define some terms...
- i. Cessationist- the revelatory or sign gifts of prophecy, healing, words of knowledge, and tongues have ceased.
 - ii. Continuist/continuationists- all the gifts described in the NT are continue for today...
 - iii. There are very godly scholars on both sides of the issue. Therefore, we must proceed graciously.
 - iv. To make my case for the continuist position I'm going to look at two things and then make application-
 - 1. Arguments against the sign gifts.
 - 2. Arguments for the sign gifts.

1. Arguments against the sign gifts

a. First, the sign gifts ceased with the apostles.

- i. **2 Corinthians 12:11-12 (ESV) – 11** I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. **12** The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.
 - 1. Cessationists argue that sign gifts were meant to authentic the apostles and their message.
 - 2. Since there are no longer apostles (everyone agrees on this point) sign gifts are no longer available or needed in the church today.
 - 3. This makes sense, but is this what the Bible teaches?
- ii. Response-
 - 1. What does 2 Cor. 12:11-12 actually say?

- a. Paul does not say that signs and wonders were the signs of an apostle. Listen carefully...
- b. V. 12 "the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, *with* sign and wonders and mighty works."
- c. Paul distinguishes the marks of a true apostle from signs, wonders, and mighty works.
- d. The signs themselves were not signs of a true apostle but something else.
- e. The signs of an apostle were performed alongside of signs, wonders, and mighty works.
- f. **John Piper writes,**
 - i. The text does not require that "signs and wonders" be unique to the apostles. For example, if I say, "The sign of a professional biker is strong thighs," I do not mean that no non-professional bikers have strong thighs. I only mean that professionals bikers do, and when taken together with other evidences, this can help you know that a person is a professional biker. Paul is not saying that only apostles can perform signs and wonders. He is saying that apostles certainly can, and together with other things this will help the Corinthians know that he is a true apostle. (Signs and Wonders: Then and now, Piper)

2. In addition, many non-apostles performed miracles.

- a. Like who?
 - i. "The 70 who were commissioned in Luke 10:9,19-20;
 - ii. At least 108 people among the 120 who were gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost;
 - iii. Stephen (Acts 6-7);
 - iv. Phillip (Acts 8);
 - v. Ananias (Acts 9);
 - vi. Church members in Antioch (Acts 13);
 - vii. Anonymous converts in Ephesus (Acts 19:6);
 - viii. Women at Caesarea (Acts 21:8-9);
 - ix. The unnamed brethren of Gal. 3:5;
 - x. Believers in Rome (Rom. 12:6-8);
 - xi. Believers in Corinth (1 Cor. 12-14);
 - xii. Christians in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:19-20).” (Sam Storms)

3. Furthermore, the NT does not reduce the sign gifts to the role of attestation. They have many other roles. Like what?

- a. They glorify God (John 2:11, 9:3, 11:4,40; Matt. 15:29ff)
- b. They bolster evangelism (Acts 9:32-43)

- c. They express love, compassion, and care for the sheep (Matt. 14:14; Mark 1:40-41)
- d. They edify the body (1 Cor. 12:7)
- e. They are for the common good (1 Cor. 14)

b. Second, the sign gifts ceased when the churches foundation was laid.

i. Ephesians 2:19–20 (ESV) — 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

1. Apostles and NT prophets laid the foundation of the church.
2. Since the foundation has been laid, we no longer need apostles and prophets.

ii. Response-

1. Yes, it is true, there is a foundational role for Apostles and prophets, especially the prophets closely associated with the apostles.
2. But this argument is not convincing.
 - a. In the NT prophecy happens in the context of local church gatherings (Romans 12 and 1 Cor. 12-14).
 - b. But the prophecy described in these places is not laying the foundation for the church, since that has already happened, it is edifying or building up the church.
 - c. Furthermore, in 1 Cor. 13 Paul says that the sign gifts (including prophecy) will continue until Christ returns. More on this in a moment...
 - d. So yes, prophets and apostles played a unique role in laying the foundation of the church and yes there is no longer the office of apostle or prophet, but this does not imply that the gift of prophecy has ceased.

c. Third, the sign gifts undermine the authority of Scriptures.

i. Argument-

1. The sign gifts were given before the NT canon was closed.
2. Now that the canon of the NT has been closed, we no longer need the sign gifts.

3. What is driving this? A good and genuine concern that revelatory gifts like prophecy, tongues, and words of knowledge will undermine the sufficiency and authority of scripture.

ii. Response-

1. I share this concern.

a. And yes, there are people who grossly abuse the sign gifts.

i. Illustration:

1. Thus sayeth the Lord, you need to move to Kansas city...

2. God told me that we are not supposed to date anymore...

b. Furthermore, the last thing we want to do is undermine the authority or sufficiency of scripture.

c. Scripture alone is our final authority.... period.

2. Yet... it is the authority of Scripture that leads us to believe in the sign gifts. What do I mean? This authoritative book tells us that they will be around until Christ returns.

3. Furthermore, this concern is often a critiquing a straw man.

a. The vast majority of continuationists do not believe that sign gifts have the authority of Scripture.

b. They believe that all the sign gifts, especially prophecy must be judged by Scripture.

c. If someone's prophecy or word of knowledge contradicts Scripture, it is not from the Holy Spirit....

d. This is why the NT encourages us to test all prophecy with scripture

i. Acts 21:10-11

ii. 1 Thess. 5:19-21

iii. 1 Cor. 14:29

d. Fourth, the sign gifts are missing in church history.

i. Argument-

1. This was argued passionately in the 19th century by BB Warfield in his book Counterfeit Miracles.

2. His wife was hit by lightning on their honeymoon and never recovered, even though he prayed for her vigorously....

ii. Response-

1. This is simply not true.

2. Countless examples in church history...

3. Bruce W. Story...

4. Recent UGM story of prophecy and a collar bone being healed...

e. **Fifth, the sign gifts are very messy and lead to abuse.**

i. Argument

1. Massive abuses... people barking like dogs, laughing uncontrollably, having their fillings turn to Gold, and this is just the type of the iceberg.
2. My own experiences...

ii. Response

1. If this is your objection let me ask you a simple question, have you read 1 Corinthians? The church in Corinth had massive problems including the abuse of spiritual gifts.
2. But Paul does not tell them to stop practicing spiritual gifts, instead he instructs them.
3. We don't want to through the baby out with the bathwater. Why? Because babies are precious... spiritual gifts are precious.

f. *We have looked arguments against the sign gifts...*

2. **Arguments for the sign gifts...**

a. *The Bible teaches...*

b. **First, all the gifts are needed until the church reaches maturity.**

- i. "**Ephesians 4:11–14 (ESV) — 11** And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, **12** to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13** until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, **14** so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

1. More than likely, verse 11 describes gifting not office...

- a. Apostolic gifting
- b. Prophetic gifting
- c. Evangelistic gifting
- d. Gifted shepherds and teachers...

2. How long will we need these gifts?

- a. As long as the church needs to be equipped (v. 12)
- b. As long as the church needs to be built up (v. 12b)
- c. As long as the church needs to be unified and mature (v. 13)

d. As long as the church needs to be spared from being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, human cunning, and craftiness...

3. Application...

a. Paul seems to be saying that we need the gift of prophecy, evangelism, shepherding, and teaching until the church is mature...

b. These needs are still being met and they will continue to need to be met until Christ returns.

c. **Second, all the gifts are needed throughout the last days.**

i. **Acts 2:14–18 (ESV) — 14** But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. **15** For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. **16** But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: **17** " 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; **18** even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

ii. Exposition

1. We are in the last days... what do I mean?

2. There is nothing else that needs to happen before Christ returns therefore, we are in the last days...

3. The last days stretch from Christ first to second coming...

4. This means that we should expect all the things promised in Joel 2 to happen throughout the last days...

a. Sons and daughters will Prophesy

b. People will dream dreams

c. People will have visions...

d. Etc....

iii. **D. A. Carson writes,**

1. "the coming of the Spirit is not associated merely with the dawning of the new age but with its presence, not merely with Pentecost but with the entire period from Pentecost to the return of Jesus the Messiah" (*Showing the Spirit*, 155).

d. **Third, all the gifts are needed until Christ returns.**

i. **1 Corinthians 13:8–13 (ESV) — 8** Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it

will pass away. **9** For we know in part and we prophesy in part, **10** but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. **11** When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. **12** For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. **13** So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

ii. Exposition

1. this is the favorite proof text of the continuist... Why? It tells us specifically when the gifts will cease...
2. verse 8 tells us that at some point prophecies, tongues, and words of knowledge will cease...
3. The question is when????
4. Paul tells us...
5. They will cease when the perfect comes. When will the perfect come?
6. Again, he tells us....
 - a. When will we stop acting like children (v. 11)?
 - b. When will we no longer see dimly (v. 12)?
 - c. When will we see God face to face (v. 12)? (Rev. 22:4)
 - d. When will we fully know (v. 12)?
7. When will all these things happen?
 - a. When Christ returns.

iii. Some argue that the perfect refers to the closing of the canon in roughly 90 AD, which was 35 years after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians...

1. **Wayne Grudem writes,**

- a. "But would it be persuasive for Paul to argue as follows: "We can be sure that love will never end, for we know that it will last more than thirty-five years"? (Grudem, 1038).

2. **John Piper writes,**

- a. "Both of these phrases ("seeing face to face" and "understanding as we have been understood") are stretched beyond the breaking point if we say that they refer to the closing of the New Testament canon or the close of the apostolic age. Rather, they refer to our experience at the second coming of Jesus. Then "we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2)."

iv. Corroborating evidence.

1. **1 Corinthians 1:7 (ESV) — 7** so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,
2. In 1 Corinthians 1:7 Paul ties the possession of spiritual gifts (Gk.

χαρίσματα, from χάρισμα, G5922) to the activity of waiting for the Lord's return: "you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Grudem, 1034)

v. Summary...

1. Paul specifically tells us that the church of Jesus Christ has access to all the spiritual gifts until Christ returns.

e. **Fourth, the Bible never says that certain gifts have ceased.**

i. On the other hand...

1. 1 Cor. 13: 8-13, 1 Cor. 1:7, Acts. 2:14-18, and Ephesians 4:11-12 all indicate that all the gifts are needed until Christ returns.

ii. Therefore, the burden of proof lies with the cessationist.

iii. To overcome this evidence the cessationist must provide a biblical text, even a single text, that explicitly says the sign gifts have ceased. They can't!

3. Application/conclusion

a. We have looked at two things.

- i. *Arguments against the sign gifts.*
- ii. *Arguments for the sign gifts.*

iii. We are convinced that none of the gifts have ceased. Let's make some application...

b. **We are encouraged to pursue all the spiritual gifts.**

i. **1 Corinthians 14:1 (ESV) — 1** Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

ii. **1 Corinthians 14:39 (ESV) — 39** So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.

iii. We should earnestly desire all the spiritual gifts so that we can edify the body of Christ...

iv. What is prophesy?

v. How does prophecy edify?

1. Tell story involving Jeff Wells.
2. Tell story of Mike Kelly...

c. We should pursue all the spiritual gifts for the sake of evangelism.

i. John piper writes,

1. "I count at least 17 times where miracles help lead to conversions in the book of Acts... Peter heals Aeneas, and Luke says, "And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord." Peter raises Tabitha from the dead, and Luke says, "It became known to all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord."

ii. Story about John Wimber on the plane....

d. We must remember that God is sovereign over the dispersal of gifts

- i. We don't have to work these up...
- ii. We must wait patiently for him to move...
- iii. If he decides to give this church gifts, and they are practiced in an orderly God honoring fashion, we don't want to get in the way.
- iv. If he decides to not give us these gifts, we can trust him.

e. We should pursue gifts, but....

- i. God has given us an even greater gift than the gift of healing, prophecy, tongues, or words of knowledge....
- ii. He has given us his own son.
- iii. This came at great personal cost...
- iv. Only when we look to Jesus for the forgiveness of sins will you and I have access to the glorious things described in 1 Cor. 12-14.
- v. Do you know Jesus???

4. Conclusion:

- a. When I started, I asked this question, "Should we pray the prayer of Acts 4?" I believe the answer is a resounding yes...

b. Acts 4:29-31 (ESV) — 29 And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, **30** while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." **31** And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

c. Lets pray...