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Sermon Notes

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The Sign Gifts Today, Part 1

1 Corinthians 12:8-13

In October 1900, 29-year-old Agnes Ozmen enrolled at the freshly founded Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas. During that Fall, an instructor at the Bible College, Methodist Holiness pastor Charles Fox Parham, directed his students to catalog from the book of Acts every mention of the Holy Spirit and his activities. Consensus emerged on two points: (1) outward manifestations always accompany the Spirit's activity, and (2) speaking in tongues is the outward sign, the proof of what he called the "baptism in the Holy Spirit."

Professor Parham announced a watch night service for New Year's Eve. Sometime in the early hours of January 1, 1901, Parham placed his hands on Agnes Ozmen at her request, praying that she would receive baptism by the Holy Spirit. Witnesses reported that, for the next three days, Agnes spoke and wrote only in Chinese. Just as in Acts 2 at the feast of Pentecost, the miraculous "tongue" reportedly spoken at Topeka was a known, existing human language foreign to the speaker.

The second pivotal event occurred when African-American Holiness-turned-Pentecostal pastor William J. Seymour made his way to **Azusa Street** in Los Angeles to preach. Seymour... witnessed the outbreak of a revival on April 9, 1906 that would not cease for three years. This included an eruption of miraculous gifts—especially speaking in tongues, and pumped out Pentecostal evangelists, missionaries, and ministers worldwide.

The defining theological distinctive of Pentecostalism was distilled at Topeka—the baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues. The

launching pad of what would become global Pentecostal advance was situated on Azusa Street.

And the spread of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements has been staggering...

In 1985, Fuller Seminary professor C. Peter Wagner showed that Pentecostal and Charismatic churches were experiencing a growth that is unprecedented in the history of the church:

“While back in 1945, Pentecostals/charismatics could count only 16 million members worldwide, by 1975, they had grown to 96 million, and only ten years later, they numbered an astounding 247 million! I am not aware of any non-political, non-militaristic voluntary association which has grown at that rate in all of human history.” [cited in Grudem, 1043]
In 1985, 247 million represented 5 percent of the world’s population.

By 2011, the Pew Forum estimated that there are about 279 million Pentecostal Christians and 305 million charismatic Christians in the world... a total of almost 600 million... this represents 27% of all people designated as Christian and more than 8% of the world’s population.

However, the explosive spread of Pentecostals and charismatics worldwide has not been without controversy or opposition within the Christian world... many have spoken strongly against this movement as deficient theologically or practically

In 2007, the International Mission Board of the SBC ruled that anyone who prayed in a private prayer language could not serve as a missionary. That policy was reversed in 2015, but it shows how divisive the charismatic issue has been.

Just because a movement is numerically huge doesn’t make it right.
A lot of the churches in sub-Saharan Africa are also infected with the PROSPERITY GOSPEL

As we continue this morning our study of 1 Corinthians 12 and the spiritual gifts, we come to some very turbulent waters... but we must sail ahead and not turn back! The Lord wants us to understand every text of scripture; and 1 Corinthians has

already brought us through many controversial texts – church discipline, sexual immorality, homosexuality, divorce, meat sacrificed to idols, head coverings, the Lord’s Supper

He will see us through this as well!

I. Have Some of the Gifts Ceased? Charismatics, Cessationists, and Others

Wayne Grudem asks the simple question: “Are all the gifts mentioned in the New Testament valid for use in the church today?”

1 Corinthians 12:8-10 To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.

1 Corinthians 12:28 And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

A. To Many Christians, It Seems Some Gifts Have Ceased

Miracles... Healings... Speaking in tongues... Interpretation of tongues... Prophecy

These are frequently called “sign gifts” ... or “miraculous gifts”

And they are the source of a great deal of controversy in the Christian world

B. Most Christians never experience these “sign gifts” and are left wondering about them when they read 1 Corinthians 12 or various passages in Acts in which the Spirit comes and people speak in tongues or do miraculous healings

C. Evangelicals Divided

1. Some evangelicals believe that all the spiritual gifts listed in the Scripture are still valid today; for the most part, these are the **charismatics** of today that we've been discussing
2. Some evangelicals would say NO... unequivocally, these sign gifts were temporary, only for the era of the Apostles, and they have most definitely CEASED... they are called "**cessationists**"
3. But there is also a large "middle group" of evangelicals who are neither charismatics on the one side or cessationists on the other; they are unsure if this question can be decided from scripture or from their own limited experience, and are simply UNDECIDED... in this group we might have some that call themselves "**open but cautious**"
4. Others in this middle group would say they are "**open but skeptical**"... they are more negative to the charismatic experiences because of excesses and aberrations and faulty unbiblical behaviors they have seen or read about.

D. As Always... the Romans 4:3 Question is Where We Must Start

Romans 4:3 What does the Scripture say?

II. Does Scripture Tell Us When the Miraculous Gifts Cease?

Key text for cessationists...

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the imperfect disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. ¹² Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love

A. Cessationists Point to this Passage as Proof That Sign Gifts Cease

1. They say that, “when the perfect comes the imperfect passes away” refers to the completion of the New Testament canon...
2. When the apostles finish writing the New Testament, there is no longer any need for further revelations, for the Bible would be completed, telling us everything we need for life and godliness
3. This is the only clear cessationist passage in the New Testament; all other mention of the gifts simply show them functioning

B. What Is the Point of 1 Corinthians 13?

1. The Corinthians were proud and vaunting themselves forward, especially with showier gifts like speaking in tongues
2. Paul wants them to understand the purpose of spiritual gifts, and how much more vital is Christian love... love is superior to all of them... if they use their spiritual gifts without love, they are NOTHING
3. The ultimate purpose of gifts: building up the Body of Christ IN LOVE
4. Therefore love is ETERNAL, whereas all the spiritual gifts are TEMPORARY... they are needed NOW, but in heaven they will ALL become obsolete

1 Corinthians 13:8-10 But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial disappears.

The spiritual gifts are used for BUILDING THE BODY, like a vast spiritual temple that is rising larger and larger, more and more glorious... the church on earth is like a CONSTRUCTION SITE, and there are all kinds of features of a construction site that are temporary

Imagine a mansion being built out on some spectacular site in Wyoming, far from civilization, with an incredible view of the Grand Tetons; the construction company building the mansion

has to use **gas-powered generators** to power their tools or light lights because there's no electricity yet; every morning, the work crew has to fill the generators with gasoline and start them up to generate electricity for the worksite; so also there are **portable latrines** because there's no plumbing; the workers have to use the port-a-potties throughout the day; and perhaps the construction company hires a **food truck** to come at lunchtime to feed the workers, because there is no working kitchen or refrigerators to cook meals

The generators and port-a-potties and food trucks will all go away once the mansion is done being built. So it is with spiritual gifts... while the worldwide church of Jesus Christ is rising to become a spiritual temple in which God will dwell forever with his people, the spiritual gifts are needed. But once the work is perfected in heaven, the gifts will immediately become obsolete.

5. Paul especially zeroes in on KNOWLEDGE, saying that the spiritual gifts (prophecy and tongues especially) give us a certain level of knowledge of God, but there is an infinitely superior level of knowledge of God awaiting us IN HEAVEN

John 17:3 Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

1 Corinthians 13:9-10 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial disappears.

Our knowledge of God now is true and right and pure, and sufficient to save our souls... but it is PARTIAL... much is missing

6. Therefore, Paul says all spiritual gifts are like “baby talk” which will someday (in heaven) be superseded by vastly superior knowledge of God

1 Corinthians 13:11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.

7. This “baby talk” actually includes ALL the word-based spiritual gifts, including teaching and preaching... sound exegesis, logical and theological deductions, clear articulation of insights derived from scripture... it’s all “baby talk”; so also any supernatural insights gained from prophecy... “baby talk”... resulting in a limited, imperfect knowledge of God and of Christ

1 Corinthians 13:12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

8. Until “the perfect” comes, we need the gifts

C. What Is “The Perfect” That Is Coming?

1. Whatever it means, Paul clearly links the passing away of spiritual gifts to its arrival

1 Corinthians 13:9-10 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial disappears.

That is, “when the perfect comes, then THE SPIRITUAL GIFTS (like tongues and prophecy) will pass away”

2. First, it is clear that Paul is talking about the Second Coming of Christ and the beginning of our heavenly life

1 Corinthians 13:12 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

- a. To see “face to face” means to SEE GOD... the very thing that was denied to Moses, for “no man can see my face and live” (Ex. 33:20)
- b. At that moment, we shall know God fully and completely, as he has known us fully and completely
- c. This does not mean we shall know everything there is to know about the infinite God, for that is impossible; but it means that all the limitations of the flesh and of our dimness of mind and all the misconceptions about God that plague us here will be

gone forever; our knowledge of God will be pure, free from all falsehoods

- d. Paul uses “NOW...THEN” language... “NOW we see dimly, THEN face to face; NOW we know in part, THEN we shall KNOW FULLY”... something decisive is coming that changes everything
 - e. What is the decisive thing that is coming... the PERFECT that comes? It must be the glorification of all Christians that will happen at the Second Coming of Christ, and the ushering in of the eternal state... not the completion of the New Testament
3. To paraphrase Paul: “When Christ returns, then prophecy and tongues and all other spiritual gifts will pass away”... they will never be needed again!
 4. An earlier verse confirms that this is what Paul is thinking

1 Corinthians 1:7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.

D. The Cessationists’ Use of this to Prove Cessationism Fails

1. They say “the perfect” is the complete New Testament; BUT this is not sound exegesis of this particular passage
2. The infinite upgrade all Christians will get at the Second Coming when we will see “face to face” is clearly mentioned; but the completion of the New Testament is not mentioned at all
3. Furthermore, if the cessationist interpretation of this passage is true...

Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “It means that you and I, who have the Scriptures open to us know much more than the apostle Paul of God’s truth... It means that we are altogether superior even to the apostles themselves, including the apostle Paul! It means that we are now in a position in which ‘we know fully even as we are known full by God. Indeed there is only one word to describe such a view, and it is NONSENSE.” [quoted by Grudem, 1038]

E. Working this Through to its LOGICAL EXEGETICAL CONCLUSION

1. 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 does not merely fail to assert cessationist teaching
2. It actually refutes it, and is positive biblical proof that God intends for these gifts to last UNTIL THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST... “NOW”... “THEN”
3. The passage ends up being a DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD for cessationists
4. And if “the perfect” is the Second Coming of Christ, then the gifts (tongues and prophecy) will remain until then

F. Other Cessationist Arguments and Assumptions

1. On the PURPOSE of the sign gifts

A very popular cessationist teacher: “The four temporary sign gifts [his designation, not the Bible's] were miracles, healings, tongues, and interpretations of tongues. These four sign gifts had a **unique purpose** – to give the apostles credentials, to let the people know that these men all spoke the truth of God. But once the Word of God was inscripturated, the sign gifts were no longer needed and they ceased.”

The assumption in this argument is that the “gifts of healings” and “workings of miracles” mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:9-10 refer only to what Jesus and the apostles could do (including Stephen, Barnabas, and Philip). These were not gifts given to ordinary Christians, but only to the authoritative leaders of the first generation. Then they disappeared.

But this logic fails at a lot of levels... not all healings were done by Jesus and the apostles... the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12 is that gifts of healings were given widely to many different Christians according to God's will; also miracles were not only to authenticate the authority of the apostles, but also did many

other things as well, like show God's compassion for hurting people

2. On FAKES

- a. Beyond this, cessationists often point to extremes and excesses and charlatans who claim to be operating by the power of the Holy Spirit doing signs and wonders and healings, but who are later exposed as frauds

Like Benny Hinn, who orchestrates his healing services with security guards around the stage to prevent genuinely healthy people from getting close to him

- b. So, there are indeed MANY FAKES and FRAUDS...this is clearly true, but it is no actual cessationist argument
- c. It would be like saying, "Because there are false teachers teaching false doctrines, the entire gift of teaching should be thrown out as invalid"!! That's throwing out the baby with the bathwater

G. Work Still Ahead of Us

1. I have much more to learn about specific gifts, like healings, prophecy and tongues
2. All in good time... there is only so much we can do here
3. I have become convinced that the word-based spiritual gifts Paul is addressing in 1 Cor. 13 must continue until the Second Coming
4. But I have many practical questions to ask

III. If the Gifts Still Continue, Why Don't We See Them Here?

A. Obviously, It Seems to Depend Where You Are!

Gordon-Conwell church history professor William Nigel Kerr: "I think I believe these things still go on in our day, but I always seem to be in the other room when they happen!"

He is speaking of the personal experience many of us have of being strong, Spirit-filled Christians but who have never experienced any of the sign gifts.

1. If you are in some settings in sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America or China, you might have seen many manifestations of the sign gifts and have no questions about it at all

A recent Christianity Today article, June 2019 was entitled, "Do the Dead Still Rise?" (Craig Keener), advocated a balanced position on miracles, especially the resurrection of the dead... said the Western world is overwhelmingly scientific, anti-supernatural, materialist... so that even Christians tend to be very skeptical about miracles, and cite the openly fraudulent cases that cast shade on the whole question

Keener cited the case of a South African preacher Alph Lukau who posted a video of a man who rose up out of a coffin, but an investigation of the circumstances showed that the whole thing was a fraud. But Keener in the article discussed many specific cases of dead people rising to life in answer to prayer, and said it especially tends to happen in frontier areas where the gospel is first being established, and in Africa and other such cultures where there is a strong sense of the spiritual realms

Two Possible Explanations of why we in our setting don't see these things... both worthy of being weighed

B. The Spirit is Sovereign

First, the Spirit is sovereign, and moves with the gifts as he chooses and when he chooses, and he may have chosen to shutter some of the gifts for a time according to his own infinitely wise and inscrutable purposes

1 Corinthians 12:11 All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

John 3:8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

C. Are We Quenching the Spirit?

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.

We in the affluent and educated West are so enamored with science and with materialistic explanations for everything, we tend to minimize the supernatural. We have so imbibed that science will ultimately explain everything... God is only “needed” where science has not yet ventured (the “God of the gaps” theory)...

As a result, we are extremely skeptical of the supernatural; even more telling is that we may look down upon our charismatic brothers and sisters as uneducated and simple and backward... when actually in some ways they are much further ahead of where we are spiritually

We are so afraid of the excesses and dangers and extremes that we throw the whole thing out...

1 Corinthians 12 and 14 tells us to seek higher spiritual gifts

1 Corinthians 12:31 But eagerly desire the greater gifts.

1 Corinthians 14:1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

If we do not believe that certain spiritual gifts are still in operation, we will not seek them... and not seeking, we will not receive them.

IV. Are There Dangers?

Is this topic dangerous? Certainly it is! But there is danger all around!

The excesses of the Pentecostal movement are great... some branches are openly heretical (United Pentecostal Church); others have various questionable doctrines/practices

When John MacArthur speaks of “Charismatic Chaos,” he doesn’t have to look very far to find excesses and errors and frauds and bizarre practices...

But keep in mind, the Corinthian church was rife with excesses and extremes too... the right answer is not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, but to follow Scripture where it leads.

And if the Lord really does intend that spiritual gifts should flourish until the Second Coming of Christ, we might be “quenching the Spirit” and less fruitful than we should be

V. Cessationists and Charismatics Need Each Other

Wayne Gudem: “It can be argued that those in the charismatic and Pentecostal camps, and those in the cessationist camp (primarily Reformed and dispensational Christians) really need each other, and they would do well to appreciate each other more. The Pentecostals and charismatics tend to have more practical experience in the use of spiritual gifts and in vitality of worship that cessationists could benefit from, if they were willing to learn. On the other hand, Reformed and dispensational groups have traditionally been very strong in understanding of Christian doctrine and in deep and accurate understanding of the teachings of Scripture. Charismatic and Pentecostal groups could learn much from them if they would be willing to do so. But it certainly is not helpful to the church as a whole for both sides to think they can learn nothing from the other, or that they can gain no benefit from fellowship with each other.” [p. 1046]

VI. Applications

A. Spiritual Gifts are STILL the main issue... Discover, Develop, Deploy

B. Come to Christ!!