HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

SPIRITUAL GIFTS & MIRACLES

The work of the Holy Spirit in the Church

Reading Packet

Reading 1 - Irenaeus: Gifts and Miracles in the Second Century

Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book II, chapter 32 (late 2nd century) - condensed reading

Irenaeus appeals to contemporary Christian experience as part of his argument against Gnostic teachers. He reports exorcisms, prophetic gifts, healings, and other extraordinary works occurring among Christians.

His purpose is not to construct a later theology of charismatic gifts. He is arguing that the God confessed by the church is actively at work and that the church's public life differs from secretive claims of heretical teachers.

The passage is important because it provides evidence that at least some Christians in the late second century believed extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit continued beyond the apostolic generation.

Reading 2 - John Chrysostom: Gifts That Had Become Unfamiliar

John Chrysostom, Homilies on First Corinthians, Homily 29 (late 4th century) - condensed reading

Commenting on 1 Corinthians 12, Chrysostom remarks that the passage had become difficult partly because the phenomena Paul describes no longer occurred in the same familiar way. His congregation did not live inside the world of tongues and charismatic manifestations assumed by the Corinthian text.

This observation is often cited in support of cessationism. At minimum, it shows that a major fourth-century preacher regarded some apostolic manifestations as no longer ordinary in his own setting.

Chrysostom does not thereby deny every miracle or every unusual work of God. His comment is narrower: certain gifts that were once publicly recognizable had become historically distant enough to make Paul's discussion harder for later Christians to understand.

Reading 3 - Augustine: Miracles Did Not End with the Apostles

Augustine, City of God, Book XXII, chapter 8 (early 5th century) - condensed reading

Augustine knew the argument that miracles belonged to Christianity's beginning and were no longer needed once the gospel was established. Yet in City of God he records numerous reports of healings and other extraordinary events in his own time.

He does not treat every story uncritically. His aim is to show that Christians should not assume God ceased all miraculous action after the apostles. The risen Christ remains able to act in extraordinary ways.

Augustine is particularly interesting because his writings reflect development in his own expectations. His later testimony prevents an easy picture in which the early church uniformly moved from apostolic miracles to complete cessation.

Reading 4 - John Owen: Extraordinary Gifts and the Ordinary Work of the Spirit

John Owen, Pneumatologia / The Work of the Holy Spirit (17th century) - condensed reading

Owen gives extensive attention to the Holy Spirit's work in revelation, regeneration, sanctification, prayer, ministry, and the life of the church. He distinguishes extraordinary gifts associated with the church's founding era from the Spirit's ordinary and continuing work in believers.

For Owen, the cessation of foundational revelatory gifts does not imply a diminished doctrine of the Spirit. The Spirit remains the effective agent of new birth, holiness, assurance, illumination, and the gifting necessary for ordinary ministry.

This distinction becomes important in later Reformed cessationism. The debate is not between a church with the Spirit and a church without the Spirit, but over which manifestations were foundational and temporary and which operations belong permanently to Christian life.

Reading 5 - Jonathan Edwards: How to Test a Work of the Spirit

Jonathan Edwards, The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God and Religious Affections (1741-1746) - condensed reading

Edwards writes during the Great Awakening, when reports of intense emotions, bodily effects, unusual impressions, and dramatic conversions created both excitement and suspicion. He refuses to identify a work as divine merely because it is extraordinary.

Nor will he dismiss a work merely because it produces strong emotion or unfamiliar outward effects. The decisive tests concern its fruit: Does it exalt the biblical Christ, oppose sin, increase love for Scripture and truth, produce love for God and neighbor, and lead to lasting holiness?

Edwards therefore offers a framework that remains useful in debates over charismatic experience. Phenomena are neither self-authenticating nor self-refuting. They must be judged by doctrine, character, and enduring spiritual fruit.

Reading 6 - B. B. Warfield: The Case for Cessation

B. B. Warfield, Counterfeit Miracles (1918) - condensed reading

Warfield argues that the New Testament miraculous gifts functioned as credentials of the apostles and of those upon whom apostolic authority conferred such gifts. Their primary historical role was connected to the authentication of revelation and the founding of the church.

On that account, the charismata were not intended as a normal permanent possession of every later generation. As the apostolic era ended, the foundational sign gifts also passed away.

Warfield is skeptical of later miracle claims across church history, whether Catholic or Protestant, because he believes they often reproduce patterns of credulity rather than the distinctive apostolic signs of the New Testament. His work became one of the major modern statements of Reformed cessationism.

Reading 7 - John Stott: Spirit Baptism, Fullness, and Gifts

John R. W. Stott, Baptism and Fullness - summary of copyrighted material

Stott argues that every Christian receives the Holy Spirit and is incorporated into Christ at conversion. Spirit baptism should not be treated as a second blessing that separates ordinary Christians from a spiritually elite class.

He distinguishes this once-for-all initiation from repeated fillings of the Spirit. Christians are commanded to go on being filled, meaning that the Spirit's control and fruit should increasingly characterize their lives.

Stott also stresses the diversity of gifts in the body. No single gift, including tongues, is the necessary evidence that a Christian possesses the Spirit. Gifts are given for service and the building up of the church, not as rankings of spiritual status.

Reading 8 - John F. Walvoord: A Dispensational Cessationist Account

John F. Walvoord, The Holy Spirit - summary of copyrighted material

Walvoord distinguishes the Spirit's permanent ministries in the church age - regeneration, indwelling, baptism into the body of Christ, sealing, filling, guidance, and spiritual enablement - from certain miraculous sign gifts associated especially with the apostolic period.

He argues that gifts such as tongues and miraculous healing were not intended to function as normative signs of spirituality throughout the entire church age. The completion of the apostolic foundation changes the role of such signs.

Walvoord's approach therefore combines a strong doctrine of the Spirit's present activity with cessationism concerning some extraordinary gifts. It represents an influential twentieth-century evangelical and dispensational form of the position.

Reading 9 - The Continuing Question: Cessation and Continuation

Course reading - synthesis of the principal evangelical positions

Cessationists argue that revelatory and sign gifts were tied to the apostles and the foundational era of the church. They appeal to the unique authority of the apostles, the historical fading of some gifts, and the sufficiency of completed Scripture.

Continuationists answer that the New Testament does not explicitly place an expiration date on all extraordinary gifts before Christ's return. They distinguish canonical revelation from congregational prophecy, emphasize the Spirit's freedom, and point to reports of gifts across Christian history and the global church.

Both sides can affirm the sufficiency of Scripture, the necessity of discernment, and the Spirit's active work today. The sharpest questions are whether New Testament prophecy is identical in authority to Scripture, whether apostolic signs had a unique validating function, and what kind of evidence should be required for modern miracle claims.