

# Cessationism

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The title of this article is a term used by Bible students and is based on the word "cease" in I Corinthians 13:8 (KJV). In that text the Apostle Paul is talking about the supernatural "gifts" [Gr. *charismata*] of the Spirit - this being the main theme of I Corinthians chapters 12-14. These gifts are set out in I Corinthians 12:

*But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge, by the same Spirit; to another faith, by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing, by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as He will (I Cor. 12:7-11 KJV).*

The term "cessationism" is used to denote the teaching that those gifts, or manifestations, set out above have now "ceased". This school of thought teaches that with the death of the apostles - or shortly afterwards - such gifts were no longer needed and were, therefore, taken away from the church. Some think that by the end of the first century the charismatic gifts became inoperative, and thus they should not be sought by anyone today. If cessationism is correct, any charismatic gift that is claimed to be from God in modern times must be regarded as fraudulent, the result of error or deception.

A close look at Paul's statements in I Corinthians 13:8-10 makes it clear that in fact he *did* expect the gifts to cease someday. The question, then, is not *whether* the gifts would cease, but *when*! Cessationism, as a teaching, declares that they have already ceased and are not to be expected any more. On the other hand, Christians whom some call "charismatic" believe that the gifts were intended to continue throughout the church age and that both New Testament and church history demonstrate that this is so. For believers who demand Biblical proof,

only a sound exegesis of the relevant texts can provide satisfaction. Although the subject of the charismatic gifts is controversial, sincere truth-seekers and "Berean" (Acts 17:11) types of Bible students will not allow anyone's prejudices or abuses of truth to keep them from arriving at valid conclusions.

Since it is in I Corinthians 13 that the term "cease" is found in connection with charismatic gifts, it must also be in the same text that we find some clue as to the *time* of their ceasing. In the context, Paul is declaring that faith, hope and especially love are superior to the gifts. By comparison, the gifts are temporary and imperfect. He envisions a time when these transitory gifts will no longer be needed and will "pass away" (v. 8). He states that "when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears" (v. 10 NIV). Or as the KJV renders this, "When that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away." Such gifts as "knowledge" and "prophecy" are described as being "in part" (v. 9).

Paul says that now "we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am known" (v.12). We have here a contrast between what is "now" and what is "then." The "then" is obviously future to the time Paul wrote those words; a time when he says he will know "fully" and will see "face to face." Again, the question is: when is this future time?

We have already seen that verse 10 describes it as a time of *perfection*, or "when that which is perfect is come." We may ask ourselves at this point whether the Bible ever mentions a future time of perfection which will allow believers to know things "fully;" to know even as they themselves are known; to see "face to face" and no longer a poor reflection as in a mirror (and the mirrors of Paul's day were crude indeed!). In fact, there is such a mention in Scripture. In Hebrews 11 - the celebrated "faith" chapter - the writer concludes with a promise of the future perfection of believers - from both Old and New Testament periods (Heb. 11:39-40). In context, the obvious reference is to the future resurrection, the resurrection that will be "better" than the ones in Old Testament times (v. 35).

Paul knew that at the future resurrection he would be made like Christ (Phil. 3:20-21). He knew

that all the believers will share Christ's "glory" when he "appears" (Col. 3:4) the "second time" (Heb. 9:27) to bring them salvation. If this is not the future time that Paul was thinking about in I Corinthians 13, when he and all other perfected believers will "know fully," will know as they are "known," and will "see face to face," we must certainly wonder what other time could have been in his mind!

It is at this point that some cessationists have theorized that what Paul had in mind was the soon-to-be-perfected New Testament. They believe that when the New Testament stood complete, around the end of the first century, the "perfect" had arrived and that the charismatic gifts were no longer needed, and so "ceased." This ingenious theory sounds plausible and has many supporters. The problem it faces is that there is nothing in the context to suggest that Paul has such an idea in mind.

On the other hand, there *is* clear evidence in the context to support the view that Paul is thinking about the future perfection and resurrection of the saints - at Christ's second coming. In fact, chapter 15, following immediately after the three chapters on the charismatic gifts, is totally occupied with the theme of resurrection! This writer is convinced, therefore, that I Corinthians 13 does not support the cessationist view, but rather the view that the gifts were intended to continue throughout the present age, until the return of Christ and the resurrection of His people.

[Bill Wachtel was formerly President of Oregon Bible College in Oregon, Illinois and has helped pastor a number of churches. He is now retired and pursuing a wider writing and teaching ministry]

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