

Cessationism and Rebellion

Adapted from *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*

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Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. (1 Thessalonians 5:19-20)

Verses 19-22 discuss the apostolic policy toward prophecy. Paul writes, "Do not treat prophecies with contempt," but he tells the Christians to "test everything."

Cessationism is the false doctrine that the manifestations of miraculous endowments such as those listed in 1 Corinthians 12 have ceased since the days of the apostles and the completion of the Bible. Although there is no biblical evidence for this position, a main motive for this invention is to secure the sufficiency of Scripture and the finality (completion) of Scripture. However, it has been shown that the continuation of miraculous manifestations does not in fact contradict these two doctrines or put them at risk.¹ Thus cessationism is both unbiblical and unnecessary.

More than that, cessationism is also evil and dangerous. This is because if cessationism is false, then those who advocate this doctrine are preaching rebellion against the Lord.

The Bible commands Christians, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy" (1 Corinthians 14:1). If cessationism is correct but we do not know it, then we could still safely obey this instruction, although we will not receive what we desire. That is, if prophecy has ceased but I think that it continues, then I could still desire the gift of prophecy in accordance with this command, but I will not receive the gift of prophecy. No harm is done.²

On the other hand, since the cessationist teaches that prophecy has ceased, then although the Bible says "desire spiritual gifts," he will not desire spiritual gifts, since the spiritual gifts are no longer in operation, and what gifts people think they have are necessarily false. This also applies to prophecy in particular. So although Paul says, "Do not treat prophecies with contempt," the cessationist *must* treat all prophecies with contempt, since he believes that prophecy has ceased, so that all prophecies today are false. His view toward prophecy must be "reject everything" instead of "test everything." But again, if cessationism is false, then this person would be preaching rebellion against the biblical commands to desire and test spiritual manifestations.

Since the commands "desire spiritual gifts," "do not treat prophecies with contempt," and "test everything" are revealed by divine and infallible authority, the cessationist must present an infallible argument to render them inapplicable for today. If he cannot provide this but he still advocates cessationism in the face of these explicit biblical commands,

¹ See Don Codling, *Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts* (Sentinel Press, 2005).

² If prophecy has ceased but I think that it continues, I will desire it and fail to receive it, and then it is possible that I think that I have received it (and this is possible because I falsely think that it continues) and proceed to prophesy. This would be a false prophecy. There is indeed harm in this, but the problem is not in thinking that prophecy continues, but in thinking that I have the gift when I do not. So it is a related but separate issue, and it is addressed by Paul's instruction, that is, in testing the alleged prophecy, and not in imposing the unbiblical doctrine of cessationism.

then is it not obvious that he has condemned himself before God, *even if* this person is right that the gifts have ceased? No Christian should dare follow such a person or believe his doctrine. If a person preaches cessationism but cannot prove it – if he cannot provide an infallible argument for it (since the command to desire spiritual manifestations is clear and infallible), then this means that he consciously preaches rebellion against some of the Bible's straightforward commands. Why then, should he not be removed from the ministry or even excommunicated from the church?

Since the arguments for cessationism are forced and feeble, and since the doctrine presents so great a danger, it is best to believe the Bible as it is written, and obey its commands as they are stated – that is, "desire spiritual gifts" and "test everything." This position is faithful to the direct statements of Scripture, but it requires courageous resistance to fallacious arguments, academic bullying, and church traditions.

Inherent in this biblical approach is protection against charismatic fanatics and false miracles. The Bible instructs us to "test everything," and since it is sufficient, it is able to expose counterfeit miracles and false prophecies. The answer is not to assert that the gifts have ceased, but to follow the instructions that the Bible has already given on the subject. This position, that we should follow what Scripture says, would offer us perfect protection even if cessationism is correct. If prophecy has indeed ceased, then any prophecy today is false. Since the Bible is a sufficient revelation, the information in it will enable us to "test everything," so that any alleged prophecy today will either be tested, and finding it false, it will be condemned, or if the content is such that it is untestable, it will be ignored.

Cessationism teaches us to abandon some divine commands without divine warrant, and thus preaches rebellion, but the position that we should obey both "desire spiritual gifts" and "test everything" preaches obedience to the Lord, and it is at the same time able to protect itself against all deception. There is no danger in desiring spiritual gifts as long as we also test everything – if all spiritual manifestations are false, then we will expose all of them as false when we test them, and so we will regard all of them as false. A person who does this is safe from judgment.