

# Cessationism and Speaking in Tongues

A supplement to *Commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians*

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~ 1 ~

Some people call me a Reformed Charismatic.<sup>1</sup> I remember one person who criticized me on the basis that the term is a misnomer and an oxymoron. He thought that a Reformed person could not at the same time be a Charismatic, and a Charismatic could not possibly deserve to be called Reformed.

While I agree that much of my theology agrees with those who are Reformed, I do not call myself Reformed. And although I affirm the continuation of the supernatural endowments of the Spirit, I do not call myself a Charismatic. This person had a certain concept of the Reformed, and a certain concept of a Charismatic, and the two were incompatible. But why must I be either one or both of these things? The way he thinks of these two groups make them incompatible, or maybe they are indeed incompatible, but what does that have to do with me?

A person might think that a Christian must either be Baptist or Presbyterian, and if a person affirms Baptist sacraments but Presbyterian government – or any one thing that is supposedly Baptist and another that is supposedly Presbyterian – then he must be wrong, simply on the basis that, according to him, these two categories are incompatible. But this is a poor argument, and does nothing to address whether this person's doctrine is right or wrong. It does, however, tell us that the critic's understanding of the Christian world is limited to a narrow conception of Baptists and Presbyterians. He is like a frog trapped at the bottom of a well, and his idea of the heavens is as small as the opening through which he views the sky.

The Christian world is very broad. Just because a person believes in the biblical doctrine of predestination does not mean that he learned it from Calvin. Maybe he learned it from Augustine. Maybe he learned it from Hodge, or Shedd, or Berkhof. Maybe he learned it from Vincent Cheung, or you, or your pastor. How about this – maybe he read the Bible himself and learned it there! But...is it possible? Is it possible that a person can read biblical passages and actually learn biblical doctrines? Who has ever heard of such a thing? And even if it is possible, is he a Calvinist or not? Maybe he learned it from someone that you have never heard of. Now it would be most foolish of you to apply your criticisms of Calvin to this person, as if he is some devoted disciple of his, but who may have never heard of Calvin.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I capitalize the word "Charismatic," because it is used in a sense that refers to a kind or group of people commonly associated with the belief in the continuation of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. It is more than a very broad term that refers to anyone who believes in the continuation of the gifts without other assumptions attributed to such a person. Although I recognize the differences between Pentecostals and Charismatics, since this article does not address these differences, I will use the two terms as if they are interchangeable, focusing only on their similarity in affirming the continuation of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit.

So, although labels and categories can make conversation more convenient, it can also make the person who uses them lazy and careless. You cannot press an argument with labels and categories that your target has no obligation to satisfy. When you do this, you are only showing that the way you understand the terms somehow generates some conflict and confusion. You are not saying much more than this. Certainly, you cannot defend any doctrine or refute anyone on this basis alone.

Thus I would caution against simplistic categorizations that result in misrepresentations. There are those who think that if a person believes in the continuation of the supernatural manifestations of the Spirit, then they must be like the Pentecostals – that is, those crazy Pentecostals that they know about. It does not occur to him that this person might not be like the Pentecostals at all, that even his doctrine on the spiritual gifts might be vastly different. And it might not occur to him that there might be Pentecostals somewhere that are not crazy. It is unfair for a cessationist to use Pentecostals as the standard, so that it is as if a person is either like the Pentecostals *that he has seen*, or he must be a cessationist like him.

~ 2 ~

When it comes to the continuation of miracles, whether they occur to a person or through a person, the doctrine of the sovereignty of God settles the issue. God can do anything he wishes, and if he wishes, he can work a miracle today. It can be a miracle that is done to a person, or a miracle that appears to be effected through a human instrument. God can do anything he wishes, including miracles. If a person questions this, he has a much greater problem than whether he affirms cessationism. His belief about the most basic aspects about God is flawed.

Cessationists do not object to the above. They readily agree that God can do anything that he wishes. If this is true, then it is conceivable that I can pray for a cancer patient, and if God wishes, he would heal the person, and the person would be freed of cancer. Here I am not saying that it happens every time, but only that it is conceivable given the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

This is agreed by all who believe in God. However, in practice very few believe it. They say that they believe in God's sovereignty, but they deny it by their works, having a form of sound doctrine and godliness, but denying the power thereof. How often do cessationists pray for God to heal the sick? No, I am not referring to prayers that ask God to guide the physicians. I am referring to petitions that ask God to heal the sick person. How often do cessationists even attempt this? If their doctrine allows for the possibility that God might heal if he wishes, then why not ask him to heal? Is God the savior of the soul, but not of the body? Is the arm of the Lord too short, or his ears dull of hearing?

You say, it is true that God can heal if he wishes, but perhaps he never wishes to heal anymore. How do you know this? It is one thing to say that he might not wish to heal in some instances, but another to claim that he no longer wishes to heal. No one *knows* that he does not wish to heal, and there is no biblical or any other kind of evidence to show that God no longer wishes to perform miracles.

Cessationists claim that they want to protect the doctrines of the sufficiency and the completion of Scripture. I believe this, that this might be one of the reasons they consider it necessary to affirm cessationism. However, I do not believe that this is the only reason. There are ulterior motives behind this doctrine, such as unbelief, and the fear that this unbelief would be exposed if they venture out and sink like Peter did when the Lord called to him to walk on the water. Seasoned theologians do not like to be embarrassed. Some of them would rather crucify Christ with their pens, just to shut him up, than to admit that they struggle with unbelief. In any case, it has been shown that the continuation of the supernatural manifestations of the Spirit does not compromise the sufficiency and the completion of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Don Codling, *Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts*.

The affirmation of God's sovereignty means this: If God wishes to make a person speak in a language that he has never learned, he can and he will. It is as simple as that. Whether he does this is one thing, but there should be no question that it is possible, even today.

Nevertheless, we must recognize that the issue is not settled by affirming the bare doctrine of God's sovereignty, since it has to do with how he uses this sovereignty relative to the spiritual gifts, and what he has revealed in Scripture about this. Also, when it comes to spiritual gifts, we are referring to a particular mode of the manifestation of God's power, namely, through human instruments as spiritual endowments. So it is acknowledged that the matter is complex, although it remains that the foundation for the discussion must be God's sovereignty, that he can and will do whatever he wishes. And in connection with the spiritual gifts, I will say again that, although there are many verses in Scripture commanding us to operate in spiritual gifts, there is no biblical or any other kind of evidence that even comes close to suggesting that these have ceased.

~ 3 ~

Let me first apply my simple argument against cessationism to speaking in tongues. Paul writes, "Do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Corinthians 14:39). But if all supernatural gifts have ceased, then tongues have ceased. And if tongues have ceased, then all claims to speaking in tongues today are false. If all claims to speaking in tongues today are false, then we *must* forbid speaking in tongues. In other words, if cessationism is correct, then we are obligated to do exactly the opposite of what Paul commands in this verse on the basis that the situation has changed, so that the same apostolic concern would require us to forbid all speaking in tongues.

However, to turn "*Do not* forbid speaking in tongues" to "*Always* forbid speaking in tongues" would require a biblical argument that is either equally explicit, or if it must come by deduction or inference, one whose reasoning is perfect, infallible, without any possibility for error or room for criticism. Otherwise, no one has the authority to say that speaking in tongues has ceased, and still less to forbid speaking in tongues.

Jesus says, "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19). God commanded me, "You shall not commit murder." If you wish to advance a doctrine that requires me to change this to, "You shall always commit murder," then before I go on a killing spree, I am going to demand that you produce either a direct biblical command that replaces the former one, or a biblical argument supporting the new command or obligation that is clear and perfect, without any possibility of error or room for criticism. If I perceive even the slightest flaw or weakness, I am going to remain with what is clear and direct, that is, "You shall not commit murder."

Likewise, if I teach "Do not forbid speaking in tongues" and you teach "Always forbid speaking in tongues" (or a doctrine that leads to this), then one of us must be wrong. To show me that I am the one in the wrong, I would demand that you produce a biblical argument that is as clear, as forceful, as perfect, and as infallible as the one that says, "Do not forbid speaking in tongues."

Frankly, against this consideration, I would be too afraid to teach cessationism. And I wonder how we can justify the decision to allow anyone to remain in the ministry who would continue teaching cessationism after hearing this simple argument. If he cannot answer it – if he cannot produce an infallible argument for cessationism – but continues to teach the doctrine, this can only mean that he consciously promotes rebellion against the Lord. What right do we have, then, to refrain from throwing him out of the ministry? Do I have the authority to protect such a person from church discipline? But I am not stronger than the Lord. As it is, cessationism is not a doctrine to be argued about, but a sin to be repented of. Christians should not only avoid cessationism, but they should be

afraid, deathly afraid, to affirm it, since as it stands, it entails a direct and deliberate defiance of God's commands.

You may say, "It is fine to say that we must not forbid speaking in tongues, but we must forbid the counterfeit." How is this relevant at this point? If in the attempt to oppose the counterfeit, you oppose all claims to speaking in tongues as a matter of principle, then you are back to defying Paul's command again. If you admit that we must not forbid speaking in tongues, but must judge each instance on its own merit, I would agree with you, but then you are no longer a cessationist.

Now that we have mentioned the possibility of counterfeit, the discussion has finally come to the nature of tongues. Acts 2 tells us that the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to speak in languages that they had never learned. These were human languages known and recognized by the foreigners who were present. It is sometimes supposed that it was a miracle of hearing, but the foreigners heard the disciples speak in their languages because the disciples *were* speaking in their languages. The Scripture states that they spoke what the Spirit gave them. It does not say that the Spirit altered the audience's hearing. The speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is the same kind of manifestation as the one in Acts 2. There is no reason to think otherwise.

Since the utterances consist of human languages, as demonstrated in Acts 2 and also indicated in 1 Corinthians 13:1, there are certain characteristics that we should expect. A human language includes a substantial vocabulary, or words, which form sentences. In ordinary speech, sentences are marked by pauses and inflections, which often determine the precise meaning of these sentences. For example, an inflection might change what could be understood as a statement of fact into a question. Thus, "You are going to church today," changes to "You are going to church today?" An inflection might also turn an ordinary statement into an exclamation, or even an accusation. There are many other things that we can mention about the characteristics of human languages, but the point is that they exhibit discernable complex traits and patterns.

I mention the above to say this: Judging from my admittedly limited experience, most of the people who speak in tongues probably do not speak in real languages. Of course, my experience does not reflect the total number of those who claim to speak in tongues. The claim is that most of those that *I have heard* probably do not speak in real languages, and that there are probably many others like them. When they supposedly speak in tongues, their sounds do not exhibit the variety and complexity expected in actual human languages. They very often repeat only one, sometimes two or three syllables in rapid succession, like "da-da-da-da-da-da", or "wa-ka-la-ka-wa-ka-la-ka-wa-ka-la-ka-wa-ka-la-ka," or "moshimoshimoshimoshi."

There are three possible explanations for this:

First, they could be speaking in Morse code, or something like it. However, even Morse code must differentiate its signals by patterns and pauses. But when a person repeats the same syllable sixty times without any pause at all, and after taking a quick breath, repeats

the same syllable another forty times, it is difficult to believe that he is communicating any meaningful message. One may also object that speaking in tongues is supposed to refer to an ordinary human language, but this cannot settle the question, since Morse code or something like it can conceivably qualify as a human language.

Second, it is alleged that some of them might be speaking in the language of angels, which might not exhibit the same characteristics as the languages of men. However, even if 1 Corinthians 13:1 indeed grants the possibility that one might speak in the language of angels, the same concerns regarding Morse code applies. There must be discernable patterns to differentiate between signals for there to be a language, at least when it is spoken through men. And if the language of angels cannot be spoken through men *in a way* that there are discernable patterns, then they are not in fact speaking in the language of angels, since apparently this language cannot be spoken through men at all.

Third, and it seems the most likely one, those who speak without any discernable pattern are not speaking in human languages, and they are not speaking in tongues at all. I am not saying that there is no genuine speaking in tongues today. I have very forcefully affirmed that the manifestation continues according to God's will. But if those who speak in tongues wish to exercise the genuine gift, and if they wish to be taken seriously, they must raise the standard. Anything less than Morse code is unacceptable, because it would not be a language at all. And are we to believe that all or most of the people who speak in tongues do so in code? No, genuine tongues will be human languages, and will sound like human languages. We should be suspicious of any alleged manifestation of speaking in tongues that lack any discernable pattern or complexity.

One factor that has contributed to the pervasive instances of false tongues is the neglect of the fact that speaking in tongues is a *manifestation* of the Spirit – it is something that the Spirit pushes out into the open. Therefore, it is not something that one man can teach another to do. Pentecostals sometimes teach the newcomer, "Just start speaking. Say, 'da-da-da-da-ka-ka-sha-la-la...there, that's it! You've got it!'" No, neither of them has anything. It is a manifestation of the Spirit, and when it happens, there is a heavenly quality, a noticeable intelligence behind it. It is not something that can be taught, practiced, or enforced by the flesh.



~ 4 ~

Recently, I heard a sermon on the biblical approach to church growth by John MacArthur. He insisted that church growth methods that are based on business theories and marketing gimmicks are unfaithful and destructive. Rather, he proposed that Christians should return to the Acts of the Apostles, since in there the divine method modeled by the first disciples is set forth. He did not refer to some New Testament model in a general sense, but he was adamant that we must follow *the Book of Acts*.

Then, in the course of the sermon, he offered five principles that he had derived: The early church had 1) A transcendent message, 2) A regenerate congregation, 3) A valiant perseverance, 4) An evident purity, and 5) A qualified leadership. However, any honest expositor should have added, 6) A tongue-speaking, cripple-healing, dead-raising, demon-expelling, liar-slaying, prison-breaking, house-shaking, sorcerer-cursing, vision-seeing, future-predicting, miracle ministry. All these things are recorded in the Book of Acts, are they not?

Of course, I did not expect MacArthur to embarrass himself with the truth. Knowing that he was a raging cessationist, I waited for a mention of this item before it would be dismissed, but it never came. He did not even mention it. But I thought we were to return to the pattern in the Book of Acts? Which Book of Acts was he reading? Is this the champion of expository preaching that so many Christians adore? But I thought expository preaching was supposed to compel the preacher to address topics that he is uncomfortable with, and to set forth what he might find difficult to accept? What happened to that?

I will tell you what the pattern in the Book of Acts is – there is the pattern of not allowing dishonesty and prejudice to obscure the plain teachings of the word of God. If we were to force ourselves to be unreasonably charitable, we might say that MacArthur skipped the issue to save himself time from mentioning something that he did not believe in the first place. But at least on the surface, he violated his own standard of preaching the word of God as it is written. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to excuse someone for not mentioning miracles when he himself, with so much zeal and indignation, reprimands churches for failing to follow the pattern in the Book of Acts.

Jesus said that we would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. So where is the power? You who do not believe in the continuation of the supernatural gifts: You say that you have the Spirit, that all believers do, so where is the power? You hypocrite – you pretend to have it by redefining it. And you who believe in the continuation of the supernatural gifts: You claim that you have the Spirit, but where is the power? You hypocrite – you insult the Spirit by implementing a low standard, so that the false and the excesses are numbered with the genuine, if there are indeed genuine manifestations among you. When Elijah challenged the false prophets, he did not make it easy for

himself or for the Lord. He did not pour gasoline on the sacrifices, but he poured much water. He was of the mind that if God would not do it, then let it not be done, but if God would do it, then let there be no question that the miracle was of the Lord, and not of the scheming and trickery of men.

Both of you say that you have the Spirit, but when the disciples were filled with the Spirit in the Book of Acts, there were such manifestations of power that it caused the unbelievers to quake. Where is the power? It is true that a demonstration of divine power does not always entail miracles, but are there any manifestation of power among you? Any at all? Where is the divine authority in your speech? Where is the divine wisdom in your counsel? Where is the divine boldness in your action? You have your expository methods, your seminary degrees, your ordination papers, and the books by this or that theologian on your shelves. But you do not have the power.

There are those who think that my ministry is worthless. I will not address them right now. But if you see any faith, any wisdom, any power, any life, any zeal, any boldness, any other-worldly authority in me, then let it be known that it comes from the Spirit of God. He saved me, and gave me a holy calling, even the work of the ministry. And he gave me his Holy Spirit, so that I may be enabled to live this new life, in truth and holiness, and to perform the works that he has foreordained for me to do. I am not saying all of this just because I think I should, but I am consciously aware of the power of the Spirit by which I think and labor, and the difference that he makes. I can tell you what he does for me, and what I am unable to do without him.

This is the inheritance of every Christian, and the necessary equipment of every minister of the gospel. God has not given us a spirit of weakness, but a spirit of power – power to perceive, power to believe, power to declare, power to endure, and power to defeat cynicism and unbelief.