

CESSATIONISM

Willem Berends

Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics

Many authors discuss the question of prophecy and the closure of the canon from the standpoint of *cessationism*. When one studies these discussions it soon becomes clear that different people are using the term *cessationism* in very different ways. Some use the word in a wide sense to indicate the belief that **all supernatural activity** of an unusual or miraculous nature has ceased. Others use the word in a narrower sense to mean that the miraculous **gifts of the Spirit** among God's people have ceased. According to the latter view God himself still performs supernatural acts of a miraculous nature, but he no longer gives the power to do such works to his church. However, there is no agreement amongst those who hold this viewpoint as to when the cessation of miraculous gifts went into effect. For some the time of miraculous gifts coincided with the ministry of the apostles, for others gifts and miraculous activities were limited to the days of the early church, and a third position is that the practice of such gifts is reserved for extraordinary times and circumstances.

It follows that those who identify themselves, or maybe are identified by others, as *non-cessationists* cover a similar range of viewpoints. It is easy to see how people could be talking at cross purposes if they were using the word in question with such different connotations. To help clear up possible misunderstandings we will compare and evaluate the two broader uses of the word *cessationism*, and then discuss some of the implications of the nuances in connotation associated with the second use.

1. The view that all extraordinary works of God have ceased.

When we speak of the cessation of *all extraordinary works*, we mean to include such activities as miracles, healing, exorcism, prophecy, and tongues. Usually those who argue that such supernatural activities have ceased do so on the basis that these activities solely served the purpose of manifesting the authority of God's prophets and apostles. It is reasoned that once these extraordinary offices disappeared from the scene the need for miraculous activities disappeared with them.

This position, which I propose to call *strong cessationism*, is clearly spelled out by Augustus Strong in his definition of miracles:

A miracle is an event in nature, so extraordinary in itself and so coinciding with the prophecy or command of a religious teacher or leader, as fully to warrant the conviction, on the part of those who witness it, that God has wrought it with the design of certifying that this teacher or leader has been commissioned by him.¹

A somewhat different definition of the purpose of a miracle is given later in the same work:

Miracles are the natural accompaniments and attestations of new communications from God. . . . Miracles serve to draw attention to new truth, and cease when this truth has gained currency and foothold.²

If Strong's conflicting definitions leave us wondering whether the primary purpose of a miracle is to confirm a leader or to confirm the teachings of Scripture, Charles Hodge is less equivocal. He concludes his study on miracles with the observation:

The point which miracles are designed to prove is not so much the truth of the doctrines taught as the divine mission of the teacher.³

Since the definitions of Strong and Hodge speak of teachers and leaders in biblical times, the above definitions of miracles and their purpose clearly limit the possibility of miracles to the time when these teachers and leaders were still to be found.

The recognition that miracles serve to support the authority of God's servants marks a subtle change away from the position of the Reformers. For the Reformers the recognised purpose of miracles is not so much to support the divine mission of God's servants as to testify to the truth of their message. Thus John Calvin speaks of miracles as "seals" added to the Word of God,⁴ and he warns that "miracles must

¹ Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907), 118.

² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), vol. 1, 636.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah I* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 239.

never be separated from the Word."⁵ When coupled to the Word of God miracles serve "to prepare us for faith, or to confirm us in faith."⁶ But when miracles are divorced from God's Word they "bring glory to creatures and not to God."⁷ When miracles bring glory to creatures they conflict with the ultimate purpose of miracles, which is to display "the glory of God."⁸

We find a similar position in the works of William Perkins, who states the purpose of miracles is "to confirme doctrine in the Apostolike churches."⁹ Perkins is open to the possibility that God may still call men in an extraordinary manner to extraordinary offices today. But to the question whether the gift of miracles would still accompany such a calling today Perkins observes "that their use is further to confirme doctrine even at this day, it cannot be proved."¹⁰ The genuineness of a divine call, whether ordinary or extraordinary, is to be measured by whether the one called is true to the doctrines taught by those who had the authority of their teaching confirmed by miracles. Elsewhere he writes that the gift of miracles, in the sense of being able to command miracles to happen, is no longer present in the church.¹¹

John Owen recognised that one of the purposes of miracles was to give authority to "the ministers of the church." But that this was not their only purpose follows from the fact that not all those who had the gift of faith to do miracles were officers in the church. Miracles therefore served a wider purpose in that they were "exceeding useful, and necessary, unto the propagation of the gospel, the vindication of the truth, and the establishment of them that did believe."¹² In passing it is interesting to note that Owen regarded the faith which made miracles possible as a divine "warranty" to the miracle received by immediate revelation. In other words, for Owen not only did miracles testify to revelation, but revelation testified to miracles.¹³

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts I*, 203.

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on John*, I, 448.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 530.

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on John*, I, 444.

⁹ William Perkins, *The Works of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Universitie of Cambridge, the Second Volume* (London: John Legatt, 1631), 171. Original spelling.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Alle de werken van Mr. Wilhelm Perkins vermaarde Ghodgheleerde, T'weede Deel.* Amsterdam, 1662, 268, 269.

¹² John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Banner of Truth, 1967), vol. 4, 467.

¹³ Owen writes: "Some persons were by the Holy Ghost endowed with that *especial faith* which was prepared to receive impressions and intimations of his putting forth his power in this or that miraculous operation." *loc. cit.*

The nineteenth century change in emphasis from recognising the purpose of miracles as confirming doctrine to confirming the ministry of those who brought the doctrine is important, because if the purpose of miracles was merely to confirm the ministry of those who first brought God's Word then there is no further need for miracles today. Here we may well ask why this recognition of the wider purpose of miracles to confirm the Word of God and its teaching was lost in this period of post-reformational developments in theology. The answer is probably to be found in the church's fight against the onslaughts of rationalism, which movement denied all possibility of miracles. Unable to defend miracles on rational and philosophical grounds, many apologetes sought instead to defend miracles on the basis of historical biblical testimony.¹⁴ Since such argumentation only proved that miracles happened in the past, it was attractive to define miracles as something that took place in the past, i.e. in terms of their confirmation of the authority of the prophets and apostles.

When we consider the biblical material it is clear that divine attestation to apostolic authority was indeed one of the purposes of miracles. Paul speaks of "signs, wonders and miracles" as "the things that mark an apostle" (2 Cor 12:12; cf. Acts 2:43; 5:12; Rom. 15:19). But the Scriptures do not limit the purpose of miracles to this end. In Hebrews, for example, we find that the salvation offered in Christ was not only proclaimed by those who had heard Christ, but "God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" (Heb. 2:2,3). The object of God's miraculous attestation here is not his servants, but the Gospel message.

Other miracles recorded in Scripture had different purposes. The miracle of creation did not bear witness to any human agent, but to God himself. The miracle of the flood was a sign of God's displeasure with sinful man. While some of the miracles during the exodus appear to have served as a testimony to Moses, the miracle of the exodus itself served to confirm God's claim on the people he had saved (Ex. 20:1). Many miracles may have served more than one purpose. Christ's

¹⁴ Many nineteenth century American theologians adopted the Scottish common-sense philosophy in their fight against rationalism. This philosophy tried to steer a middle road between rationalism's emphasis on innate human abilities and empiricism's skepticism of spiritual truths by recognising common sense as a guide by which human knowledge was processed and appropriated. The use of this philosophical method by the nineteenth century Princeton theologians was much criticised by the twentieth century apologete Cornelius Van Til. See Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata, The Protestant Polemic on Postbiblical Miracles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 44-52; and Fred Klooster, "Cornelius Van Til - The Centennial of His Birth," *The Outlook*, May 1995, 4-10.

healing of the man blind from birth no doubt served to confirm Christ's authority, but the stated purpose was "that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (Jn. 9:3).

The wider purpose of miracles is recognised by many Reformed theologians. Geerhardus Vos lists the purposes of miracles as "apologetic", "soteric", and "typical."¹⁵ Louis Berkhof states that miracles "are connected with the economy of redemption" and aim at "a restoration of God's creative work."¹⁶ Gordon Spijkman identifies miracles as "confirmations of the invincible truth of God's Word", "reaffirmations of the normativity of the good creation order", "signs and wonders of God's intended shalom" and "manifestations of the future kingdom."¹⁷ To G.C. Berkouwer the meaning of a miracle lies in the fact that it "summons faith, and calls to worship."¹⁸

It is not surprising that those who recognise that the purpose of God's miracles is wider than attesting to the authority of God's servants are more open to the possibility of miracles continuing today. Calvin wrote that for "the preservation of the Church, almost every day, is accompanied with many miracles."¹⁹ More recently Berkouwer observed,

He who sees the miracles of Holy Scripture inseparably connected with the saving and redeeming activity of God knows that there can be no talk of a decrease or diminishing of the power of God unto salvation in this world. . . . There is not a single datum in the New Testament which makes it certain that God, in a new period of strengthening and extending of the Church in heathendom, will not confirm his message with signs, in holy resistance to the demonic influences of the kingdom of darkness.²⁰

Similarly Spijkman concludes his study on miracles with the observation,

¹⁵ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 232.

¹⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958), 177.

¹⁷ Gordon Spijkman, *Reformational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 296.

¹⁸ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 220.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Minor Prophets, III*, 275.

²⁰ G.C. Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, 221, 225.

There is no good biblical reason, therefore, to restrict God's wonder-working power to certain (past) times and (faraway) places – such as during the biblical era.²¹

2. The view that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit have ceased.

The position which we will call *weak cessationism* holds that it is not God who has ceased to do supernatural works, but God's people. There are in the main two variants to this position. The first maintains that miracles and such were limited to the church in its infancy, in order to help the spread of the Gospel in days of persecution. The second holds that miraculous gifts of the Spirit were given to confirm the authority of the leadership in the early church. This second view regards the miraculous spiritual gifts as unique to the apostles and those who received the gifts directly from them through the laying on of hands. The first position generally holds to the disappearance of miracles around the time of the establishment of the Christian faith under the first Christian emperor, Constantine. The second maintains that charismatic gifts disappeared from the church with the closing of the apostolic age.

The first position has a long pedigree. In the Reformed tradition Calvin favoured this position. He wrote:

Though Christ does not expressly state whether he intends this gift [of miracles] to be temporary, or to remain perpetually in the Church, yet it is more probable that miracles were promised only for a time, in order to give lustre to the gospel while it was new or in a state of obscurity.²²

The second position has been ably defended by Benjamin Warfield, who argued that the special charismata were "distinctively the authentication of the Apostles."²³ Warfield does not thereby mean to imply that all supernatural wondrous activity has ceased. When he questions the genuineness of the practice of faith healing he comments:

... the question is not: (1) whether God is an answerer of prayer; nor (2) whether, in answer to prayer, He heals the sick;

²¹ Spijkman, *op. cit.*...296

²² John Calvin, *Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels III*, 389.

²³ Benjamin Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (Glasgow: Banner of Truth, 1918), 6.

nor (3) whether his action in healing the sick is a supernatural act; nor (4) whether the supernaturalness of the act may be so apparent as to demonstrate God's activity in it to all right thinking minds conversant with the facts. All this we believe.²⁴

What Warfield does question is that God has promised healing in the manner claimed by so-called "faith healers," as an instant response to their healing ministry. The gift which enabled certain of God's people to heal miraculously in the name of Christ has ceased with the apostles.

Berkouwer also believes that the miraculous gifts had a special function in apostolic times, although he does not expressly limit these gifts to this period. He writes:

In the first, foundation-laying days for the Church after Pentecost, signs accompany the preaching of the gospel. Many signs and "wonders" occur at the hands of the apostles (Acts 5:12). With these miracles, we are told, the Lord certifies His word (Acts 14:3).²⁵

Some authors who speak in support of the cessation of gifts with the establishment of Christianity or the close of the apostolic age are nevertheless open to exceptions. Thus John Calvin and William Perkins seem to allow for God's temporary use of extraordinary offices, presumable with extraordinary gifts.²⁶ Similarly George Gillespie argues for the reappearance of the prophetic gift in extraordinary times.²⁷ In all three cases the authors strongly contest the claims of the "enthusiasts" that the possession of the spiritual gifts belongs to the ordinary life of the Church.²⁸

Where all *weak cessationists* are agreed is in their opposition to any suggestion of a regular continuation of the charismatic gifts or their reintroduction by way of a "second blessing." The gifts had a foundational function within the church. If some weak cessationists are open to the manifestation of such gifts in extraordinary circumstances the emphasis is always on the fact that this is by way of exception, and contrary to the norm.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, 214.

²⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, iii, 4; William Perkins, *op. cit.*, 325.

²⁷ *The Works of George Gillespie* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), vol. 2, 30.

²⁸ See my article "Prophecy In The Reformation Tradition" in this same journal.

Evaluation

Having distinguished between these two positions on cessationism it is fitting that we should seek to evaluate them. Does the Bible lead us to believe that miracles and other supernatural works are limited to certain eras of salvation history? Or is it only the gift of miracles and other special gifts of this nature that were limited in this way? Or are both positions wrong, and were the miraculous charismata meant to be a perpetual gift to the church?

Some authors have suggested that the biblical picture is one of clusters of miracles, centred around the times of Moses, the prophets, and the first and second coming of Christ.²⁹ However, we should note that this clustering applies to recorded miracles, and it would be wrong to conclude from this that miracles did not occur during those periods about which the Bible is largely silent. The testimony of the prophet Jeremiah is interesting in this regard:

You performed miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt and have continued them to this day, both in Israel and among all mankind, and have gained the renown that is still yours. (Jer 32:20).

Note that Jeremiah does not limit God's working of miracles to a specific time or a specific people. The Hebrew words *'ad hayôm hazzeh* indicate that miracles took place right up to the time of the prophet's writing. We have hints of God's miraculous works in the time of the judges and the kings, not only within Israel, but also in the wider world. Thus non-Israelites, like Eliphaz, Job, and Nebuchadnezzar, praise God for his miracles (Job 5:9; 9:10; Dan. 4:2). While the Scriptures are in the main concerned with those miracles that were a part of the revealed salvation history, there appears to be no good reason to limit God's wondrous works to the specific periods or places dealt with in the Scriptures.

A number of authors have observed that the understanding of miracles which relegates them to the past is really not too different from Deism. Spijckman points out that the denial of miracles is often based on a deistic dualism which sees God and the world as independent entities.

²⁹ Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1907), 128; cf. Louis Berkhof, *op. cit.*, 177.

For Deists the only time God intervened in the affairs of the world was at creation, when God set in motion the laws that now govern the world. For strong cessationists the time of God's direct intervention in world affairs is limited to the period before the closure of the canon. Since that time God is seen as working only through the structures set in place. This is a far cry from the biblical picture of a living God, who not only upholds the world day by day through his sovereign power, but who also listens to the prayers of his people, and works all things for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

The biblical record gives us no right to put God in a box. Rather with the Westminster Confession we must confess that:

God, in His ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure.
(5, III)

Note the Confession's use of the present tense, there is no attempt to relegate acts of extraordinary providence, or miracles, to the past. God's continuing sovereign freedom is maintained.

While we confess God's sovereign freedom in continuing to work in miraculous ways, it is quite a different question whether God's Spirit continues to give the power of miracles to his people. Here the Bible gives some indication that some gifts were only of a temporary nature, given for the founding of Christ's church. Among those "gifts" which were clearly limited to the foundational stage of the church we must first of all include those identified as apostles and prophets (Eph. 4:11). The apostles and prophets were called by Christ to lay the foundation for his church (Eph. 2:20, cf. Mt. 16:18), which is found in the inspired Scriptures, the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 1:1,2; 1 Pet. 1:12; 2 Pet. 3:16). Once this foundation was laid there was no further need for the apostolic and prophetic offices. The call to apostleship, moreover, could only come to those who had personally witnessed the resurrected Christ (Jn. 15:27; Acts 1:8; 10:41).

It is true that some earlier theologians, including John Calvin, William Perkins and George Gillespie, suggest that God may yet send new apostles in extraordinary circumstances,³⁰ but it would appear that they are thinking more in terms of the general apostolic function to spread the Gospel than the specific apostolic function to lay the

³⁰See my article "Prophecy in the Reformation Tradition" in this same journal.

foundation of the Church. This is clear in Calvin's handling of the matter. Calvin mentions the possibility of God occasionally raising up apostles in the context of the apostolic task to spread the Gospel into all the world.³¹ Here we must keep in mind that among the Reformers it was commonly believed that the Great Commission had been specifically given to the apostles. The concept of "missionaries" other than the apostles had not yet taken hold in the Reformed tradition.

It is also reasonable to conclude that with the passing of the apostles those gifts which the Bible identifies as the **marks of apostleship** departed with them. These marks are listed as "signs, wonders and miracles" (2 Cor 12:12; cf. Acts 14:3). In apostolic times the authority of the apostolic office was not only demonstrated in the miraculous works done by the apostles themselves, but also by the fact that they could confer the gift to do wondrous works to others through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17; 19:6; cf. 1 Tim. 4:14). Such strong links between the office of apostleship and the more unusual gifts lend strong support to the conclusion of Benjamin Warfield, that "the extraordinary gifts belonged to the extraordinary offices and showed themselves only in connection with its activities."³²

Yet there are some difficult questions associated with the weak cessationist position. The first is: which gifts are to be included among the extraordinary and miraculous gifts which have ceased? There is no consensus on the identity of the miraculous gifts. In the previous article we noted that some regarded the gift of prophecy as extraordinary, while others regarded it as a gift that can be found among preachers who excel in Bible interpretation and application.³³ Those who give the first interpretation tend to list prophecy with the gifts that have ceased, while those who follow the second interpretation list it with the Spirit's permanent gifts to the church.

A second question concerns the time of the cessation of miraculous gifts. John Calvin, William Perkins and George Gillespie, who link the miraculous gifts with the earliest period of the Church's development, are open to the possibility of a re-occurrence of extraordinary offices and their gifts in extraordinary circumstances. For them the cessation of these gifts meant that they had ceased to function as an ordinary part of church life, not that they had ceased altogether. But Warfield's argument that these gifts were linked with the apostolic office and

³¹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, iii, 4.

³² Warfield, *op. cit.*, 23.

³³ See my article "Prophecy in the Reformation Tradition" in this same journal.

therefore ceased with the disappearance of this office is consistent with both history and Scripture. Perhaps the insights of both viewpoints can be combined in the recognition that the gift allowing some of God's people to do extraordinary works for God at their will has disappeared, but that God may still use human agents to do wondrous works in extraordinary circumstances.

To sum up, our discussion has shown that the word *cessationism* is indeed used with many different shades of meaning, and for this reason the word should not be used without careful definitions and qualifications. We rejected that view of cessationism that would deny the possibility of miracles today. At the same time we noted that there is a wide consensus in Reformed theology that the Spirit's miraculous gifts were not meant as permanent and abiding gifts to the church. If the term *cessationism* is to have any objective meaning it is probably to be sought in this consensus.