

A Comparison of John Calvin's Cessationism and J. Rodman Williams' Continuationism

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Introduction

Among Evangelicals there is an ongoing debate about the continued availability and use of certain spiritual gifts and church offices. Spiritual manifestations like miracles, prophecy, tongues and healings (1 Cor. 12) as well as church offices like Apostle and Prophet (Eph. 4:11) are believed by some to have ceased after the apostolic church, around the time of the canonization of the New Testament. Others believe that all gifts and offices mentioned in the New Testament have continued to the present day and will be present and active until the return of Christ.

Those who believe that these certain gifts and offices have ceased are rightly called "cessationists." Generally, cessationists believe that offices like Apostle and Prophet are foundational to the church (Eph. 2:20) and that this foundation has already been sufficiently laid and that there is no longer any need for apostles and prophets. Further, cessationists generally believe that the role of the signs and wonders of the Bible were to authenticate, validate or legitimize the preaching of the Kingdom, but that now the Bible authenticates the Gospel and there is no longer need of accompanying signs and wonders to legitimize the preaching of the Gospel.

"Continuationists" would not disagree that apostles and prophets were foundational, but would disagree that there is no longer a need to lay foundations in each new place and generation that is in need of the Gospel. Further, continuationists would agree that if the role of signs, wonders and miracles was to authenticate the proclamation of the Gospel, that it stands to reason

that the same purpose still can be served even in the modern era, in fact, as long as the Gospel is preached there will be this same need.

On this particular issue, famed reformer John Calvin and charismatic theologian J. Rodman Williams had a difference of opinion. It is clear from Calvin's commentaries that he believed that the aforementioned gifts and offices were no longer in operation and had ceased. On the contrary, Williams argues for the continuation of these gifts and offices in his three volume "Renewal Theology."

John Calvin's Cessationism

Some may consider it anachronistic to apply the term "cessationist" to John Calvin, as he pre-dates the use of such a term. While it may be true that Calvin and cessationism come from different eras, the philosophies do coincide.

To many, John Calvin is known as the "Theologian of the Spirit." Dr. Steven Lawson explains where this reputation originated; "It was Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield who identified Calvin as 'the theologian of the Holy Spirit.' For all of our thinking about Calvin - of election and predestination and the eternal decree of God and the death of Christ - he is known most as the 'theologian of the Holy Spirit.'"¹

The fact that it was B.B. Warfield who first identified Calvin as the "theologian of the Spirit" is worth noting in this discussion, because it is B.B. Warfield who is known as the father of modern cessationism. It was, in part, Calvin's influence on Warfield that resulted in Warfield's conclusions about the gifts and offices in question. The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology describes Warfield as "...a strict Calvinist. He wrote numerous studies on Calvin,

¹ Lawson, Steven. "Calvin's Critique of Charismatic Calvinists." Lecture at the Strange Fire Conference at Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, October 16th, 2013

Augustinian theology, and the Westminster Confession, both to illuminate the theological history and to advocate the positions thus illuminated.”²

Calvin’s influence on Warfield, as well as hundreds of thousands of others, came by way of his exhaustive commentary series. In his commentaries on Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Acts and Matthew traces of Calvin’s cessationism are evident.

Throughout his commentaries, Calvin develops a definition of prophesy that is unique and most certainly distinct from the popular understanding of prophecy. Calvin describes this function as; “hardly anything else than the right understanding of the Scripture, and the peculiar faculty of explaining it.”³ Calvin goes on to describes prophets as “eminent interpreters of Scripture, and farther, persons who are endowed with no common wisdom and dexterity in taking a right view of the present necessity of the Church, that they may speak suitably to it, and in this way be, in a manner, ambassadors to communicate the divine will.”⁴ Finally, in a statement that would challenge most conceptions of prophecy, Calvin states; “I understand this term to mean doctrine, by which we are trained to piety, to faith, to the worship and fear of God, and the duties of holiness and righteousness...prophecy does not mean the gift of foretelling future events.”⁵

Calvin’s cessationism did not apply to every spiritual gift listed in the New Testament. In Calvin’s commentary on the spiritual gifts listed in Romans 12 he makes a distinction between “miraculous graces” and “ordinary gifts”; “...it does not appear that Paul intended here to mention those miraculous graces by which Christ at first rendered illustrious his gospel; but, on the contrary, we find that he refers only to ordinary gifts, such as were to continue perpetually in

² Elwell, Walter A., Ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984. (1258)

³ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Romans*. Ravenio Books, 2017 (Comment on Romans 12:6)

⁴ Calvin, John. *Commentary on 1-2 Corinthians*. Ravenio Books, 2012 (Comment on 1 Cor. 12:28)

⁵ Ibid, (Comment on 1 Cor. 14:3)

the Church.”⁶ In making this distinction, Calvin suggests that while the “ordinary gifts” of service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership and mercy are perpetual, the “miraculous graces” mentioned elsewhere are, by implication, temporary.

1 Corinthians 12-14 provides the lengthiest explanation of spiritual gifts in the entire Bible. This passage addresses the nature of the gifts, the source of the gifts, the purpose of the gifts and the right use of the gifts. In his commentary on these chapters Calvin writes;

As to the passage before us, we must observe, that of the offices which Paul makes mention of, some are perpetual, others temporary. Those that are perpetual, are such as are necessary for the government of the Church; those that are temporary, are such as were appointed at the beginning for the founding of the Church, and the raising up of Christ’s kingdom; and these, in a short time afterwards, ceased. To the first class belongs the office of Teacher, to the second the office of Apostle; for the Lord created the Apostles, that they might spread the gospel throughout the whole world, and he did not assign to each of them certain limits or parishes, but would have them, wherever they went, to discharge the office of ambassadors among all nations and languages.⁷

While 1 Corinthians 12-14 addresses the gift of tongues directly, Calvin does not comment on the cessation or continuation of the gift of tongues in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, but he does speak on this topic in his commentary on Acts; “The gift of the tongues, and other such like things, are ceased long ago in the Church...”⁸

Like in his commentary on Romans, Calvin separates the gifts into distinct categories, enumerating some that are perpetual and some that are temporary. Curiously, Calvin does seem to open to the possibility that there may be exceptional circumstances that may warrant the resurfacing of those gifts which he considers to have ceased; “For it is difficult to form a

⁶ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Romans*. Ravenio Books, 2017 (Comment on Romans 12:6)

⁷ Calvin, John. *Commentary on 1-2 Corinthians*. Ravenio Books, 2012 (Comment on 1 Cor. 12:28)

⁸ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Acts*. Ravenio Books, 2012 (Comment on Acts 10:44)

judgment as to gifts and offices of which the Church has been so long deprived, excepting only that there are some traces, or shadows of them still to be seen.”⁹

As Calvin turned his attention to the offices listed in Ephesians 4, he again employed a distinction between some offices and others. His distinction, considered arbitrary by continuationists, is consistently applied to each passage on spiritual gifts. Regarding the five (or, as some count them, four) offices of the church, Calvin commented:

...of the five offices which are here enumerated, not more than the last two are intended to be perpetual. Apostles, Evangelists, and Prophets were bestowed on the church for a limited time only, — except in those cases where religion has fallen into decay, and evangelists are raised up in an extraordinary manner, to restore the pure doctrine which had been lost. But without Pastors and Teachers there can be no government of the church.”¹⁰

Calvin echoes this same attitude toward the temporary nature of the apostleship in his commentary on Matthew; “It is proper to observe, however, that he does not as yet speak of perpetual apostleship, but only of temporary preaching, which was fitted to awaken and excite the minds of men, that they might be more attentive to hear Christ.”¹¹

In a lecture given at the “Strange Fire” conference in 2013, Dr. Steven Lawson succinctly summarizes Calvin’s opinion on the cessation of the apostolic office and its relationship to the miraculous; “[Calvin] was convinced that the office of the apostle was restricted to the first century and he will argue, therefore, miracles are restricted to the first century as validations of the new message that [the apostles] are bringing.”¹²

In this same lecture, Lawson argues, convincingly, that Calvin is a main contributor to the concept of cessationism. Lawson states unequivocally that Calvin believed that “miracles” is a

⁹ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Acts*. Ravenio Books, 2012 (Comment on Acts 10:44)

¹⁰ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Ephesians*. Titus Books, 2013 (Comment on Eph. 4:11)

¹¹ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Matthew*. Ravenio Books, 2015 (Comment on Mt. 10:1)

¹² Lawson, Steven. “Calvin’s Critique of Charismatic Calvinists.” Lecture at the Strange Fire Conference at Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, October 16th, 2013 (20:20)

“ceased gift,”¹³ and that “From the outset of Calvin’s public ministry he believed that the gift of miracles had ceased during the apostolic age.”¹⁴

Lawson concludes his argument with a clear and direct proclamation; “[Calvin] was a cease-ationist.”¹⁵ Based on a direct reading of Calvin’s own works as well as the assessment of renowned Calvinists like Warfield, Lawson and others, Calvin’s cessationism seems to be solidly established.

J. Rodman Williams’ Continuationism

J. Rodman Williams is not nearly as well known as John Calvin. John Williams lived from 1918 to 2008 and served as a theologian, professor, chaplain and pastor. In 1965, during the height of the Charismatic renewal in the United States, Williams experienced what Charismatics call “the filling of the Holy Spirit.” Rodman describes his experience; “It was joy unspeakable, reality amazing, upsurge of heavenly language – glory! I received my baptism in the Holy Spirit”¹⁶

Williams went on to write several books, but his three volume “Renewal Theology” is the best known. Williams had set out to write a “Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective” and many evangelicals considered his attempt a worthwhile contribution to the evangelical dialogue regarding the Holy Spirit and the spiritual gifts. Historical Theologian Gregg R. Allison describes William’s impact: “One of the most important contributors to the systematic formulation of Pentecostal-charismatic doctrine was J. Rodman Williams. In his

¹³ Lawson, Steven. “Calvin’s Critique of Charismatic Calvinists.” Lecture at the Strange Fire Conference at Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, October 16th, 2013 (21:35)

¹⁴ Ibid (21:45)

¹⁵ Ibid (22:35)

¹⁶ Elwell, Walter A., Ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984. (1276)

Renewal Theology, Williams devoted hundreds of pages to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts.”¹⁷

In *Renewal Theology*, Williams addresses the question of cessationism head on:

Whatever the attempted exegetical and historical interpretations made to justify such a view (and they are numerous), the truth of the matter is that a lack of significant experience of the pneumatic charismata results in the efforts of some people to distance themselves from the gifts because of not really knowing how to cope with them. Accordingly, despite the obvious Pauline teaching of their relevance for the church throughout the ages, such people seek to confine the gifts to the New Testament period.¹⁸

In the mind of Williams, cessationism was not a logical conclusion deduced from an exposition of the scriptures. Rather, it was a construct formulated to explain and even justify the lack of experience with certain gifts and phenomena. Like Calvin, Williams was willing to be frank in his challenge to those who disagreed with his conclusions; “One could hope that those who deny scriptural relevancy of the gifts for the church for today (often while claiming that the Bible is inspired throughout!) and therefore eviscerate the word of God of its power would humble themselves, admit their need, and allow the Lord to do a new work in their lives.”¹⁹

One of the major issues of contention in the debate regarding the cessation or continuation of the spiritual gifts is the role of contemporary prophecy. As previously mentioned, Calvin defined prophecy as the ability to understand, explain and apply scripture. While this understanding of prophecy preserves the sufficiency and authority of the Bible, it is not satisfactory to some who simply do not observe that definition in the pages of scripture. In addressing the relationship or modern prophetic ministry to the canonized word of God,

¹⁷ Allison, Gregg R. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2011. (447-448)

¹⁸ Williams, J. Rodman. *Renewal Theology, Vol II: Salvation, the Holy Spirit and Christian Living*. Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books (Zondervan), 1990 (327)

¹⁹ *Ibid* (327)

Williams believed that prophetic utterances should be subservient to scripture; “Such revelation, I must immediately add, does not place the prophetic message on the same level as scripture. It is revelation that is subordinate to what God has specially revealed to apostles and prophets and has been set forth in scripture.”²⁰

Williams, and John Wimber like him, had a category for prophetic utterance that did not result in scripture. This is presumably the type of prophecy practiced by Philip’s four prophesying daughters (Acts 21:9) or those who prophesied in Corinth, or those who prophesied over Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14). In both the Old and New Testaments there are non-canonical prophecies. Williams assumed that this practice would and should continue.

Williams also held a unique view on the purpose and role of miraculous activity in the debate at hand. While both cessationists and continuationists would agree that the role of signs, wonders and miracles in the Bible were to authenticate and validate the advent of the Kingdom of God and the preaching of the Bible, cessationists no longer believe that to be necessary. In fact, many cessationist would claim that modern-day miraculous activity detracts from the Bible and invalidates those who practice such gifts - an almost total reversal of the purpose of miracles in the Bible.

Williams took a consistent view of the role of the miraculous, expecting the same results today as in the first century;

“Miracles were in some sense signs of the inbreaking of the Kingdom in Jesus’ day...Hence, as the time draws near for the final coming of the kingdom miracles may multiply as powers of the age to come breaking in upon the present age...hence we may hope and expect that far greater will be the genuine miracles that herald the coming of the kingdom in power and glory.”²¹

²⁰ Williams, J. Rodman. *Renewal Theology, Vol II: Salvation, the Holy Spirit and Christian Living*. Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books (Zondervan), 1990 (382)

²¹ *Ibid* (380)

In fact, Williams expected miraculous activity to increase as the return of Christ drew near; “We may be in the beginning of a period of increased miraculous activity. If miracles may also be described as ‘powers of the age to come’ (Heb. 6.5) and if that age is drawing quite near, we may expect increasing miraculous activity.”²² To Williams, anytime the Kingdom made an advance (historically, geographically, personally) the supernatural was expected to accompany the advance.

Conclusion

While Calvin was concerned about the misuses and abuses of “sick-headed” and “fanatic” continuationist groups like the Anabaptists and Libertines, Williams felt that the continuation of the gifts was essential for the church’s function and operation; “Let it be firmly said that the church cannot be fully or freely the church without the presence and operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”²³ It seems that Williams was more concerned with the error of neglecting the gifts than abusing the gifts. Calvin’s response to abuse was to deny the use, while Williams’ approach was to correct the abuse.

Both Calvin and Williams were driven by a desire to honor the Word of God. Calvin’s honor manifested itself in a desire to protect the Bible while Williams’ desire led him to want to experience the Bible. Both were genuine men of God whose theological principles were shaped by scripture and filtered through their experience (or lack thereof).

²² Ibid (380)

²³ Williams, J. Rodman. *Renewal Theology, Vol II: Salvation, the Holy Spirit and Christian Living*. Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books (Zondervan), 1990 (327)

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