

**The Sign Gifts of the Holy Spirit: Cessationism vs Non-Cessationism.
A Preliminary Essay on Enns' Discussion from "The Moody Handbook of Theology"
By Scott Fillmer**

This is an informal short discussion on the question posed below. This is not a completed polished understanding of the Cessationism argument.

After reading Enns' section on "Gifts of the Holy Spirit" (ch. 21), do you agree or disagree with his conclusion that select spiritual gifts ceased after the time of the Apostles and are no longer in use today? Provide the needed scripture to substantiate your position.

According to 1 Corinthians 12:11, gifts of the Holy Spirit are those gifts given to a person at the time of their conversion, which are considered gifts, not talents, given to the individual "by the Holy Spirit," for the purpose of glorifying God.¹ The gifts are not given as a "place of service," but gifts intended to "benefit mankind on the spiritual level."² Within the section on Systematic Theology, Enns expands on a discussion about the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and walks through several, which he has determined, ceased for one reason or another.

Of the spiritual gifts, Enns lists the following: Apostle, Prophet, Miracles, Healing, Tongues, Interpretation of Tongues, Evangelism, Pastor-Teacher, Teacher, Service, Helps, Faith, Exhortation, Discerning Spirits, Showing Mercy, Giving, Administration, Wisdom, and Knowledge. Of these gifts given by the Holy Spirit, Enns describes the following as having ceased in one form or another, meaning they are not given by the Holy Spirit upon conversion at this point in history: Apostle, Prophet, Miracles, Healing, Tongues, Interpretation of Tongues, Discerning Spirits, Wisdom, and Knowledge.

¹ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, Revised and Expanded (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2008), 269-270.

² Enns, 270.

Upon closer examination we see that the “gifts” Enns argues have ceased are what he denotes as the “sign gifts,” and is the argument generally referred to as cessationism, or sometimes “Continuity vs Discontinuity.” The discussion that Enns brings to light is whether the sign gifts ceased at the time of the first century church, or do they still exist in the 21st century believer today. Those who hold to the argument that the sign gifts still exist in the 21st century church are usually referred to as “non-cessationists; within this group are charismatics and Pentecostals,” and argue from the “continuity” side of the debate.³ The others argue there is a “greater discontinuity than continuity” are generally called cessationists or non-charismatics.⁴

When making a personal examination of Enns’ conclusions it would be difficult to look at each individual sign gift and conclude one does still exist while another has ceased. One could argue that almost all, if not all, sign gifts are linked together, being either tied to revelation, the canon, and the foundation of the church, or they are not. If they are linked to, and dependent on, this and other historical evidences, then one must conclude they have ceased. If one were to conclude they are not strictly dependant on those evidences, then the possibility of sign gifts still being used in the 21st century must be realized.

Enns presents each of the sign gifts as dependant on each other, and states after each one, something similar as; this [particular] gift is “related to the foundation of the church... the foundation of the church has been laid and the canon of Scripture is complete [so] there is no need for the gift of prophecy.”⁵ Although Enns makes this concluding statement for each sign gift, he often eludes to the argument of the non-cessationalist as he did with the gift of Apostle. In this case, Enns says, “The word apostle is also used in a general sense of a ‘messenger’ or

³ Daniel B. Wallace, *Two Views on the "Sign Gifts": Continuity Vs. Discontinuity*, <http://bible.org/article/two-views-sign-gifts-continuity-vs-discontinuity> (accessed May 30, 2012).

⁴ Wallace.

⁵ Enns., 271.

‘sent one’ in the cause of Christ,” and in a sense he sabotaged his own argument.⁶ It might be different if he argued from both sides of the cessationist argument, but Enns clearly chose the cessation side. This statement opens up the possibility the sign gifts can be slightly redefined, and then manifested post-first century.

To agree or disagree with Enns’ arguments on cessationism would be difficult to conclude based solely on his arguments within one chapter. The discussion on the theology of cessationism is an enormous topic, one discussed over dissertations and centuries of work within the universal church, so any conclusion made here can only be based upon a partial understanding.

Following the evidence as presented, with minimal research to aid in understanding the issues discussed, I would have to conclude, at least in part, that I agree with Enns’ conclusions. If there would be a qualification to that statement, I would say that Enns did not go far enough in his argument for cessation of the sign gifts, especially if he was to only present one side of the argument. He backed up all of his conclusions with adequate Scripture, but left out quite a bit, probably because greater detail was outside the scope of the book.

If the sign gifts did not cease at the time of the apostolic age, where have they been for the last 20 centuries or so? Paul stated in Ephesians 2:20 that the church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, and Enns’ argument agrees with that conclusion. Even Augustine had concluded “speaking in tongues was a miracle suitable for the early church, but that it was no longer evident in his own time,” and he recognized this centuries ago.⁷ While

⁶ Enns, 271.

⁷ Augustine, *Homily 6 on the First Epistle of John*, Kevin Knight, 2009, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170206.htm> (accessed May 30, 2012).

some churches today clearly claim the sign gifts still exist, “after the first century those who have practiced the sign gifts have almost always been on the fringes of orthodoxy.”⁸

For some believers concerned about the sovereignty of God, concluding the sign gifts ceased after the first century takes away nothing from the power and majesty of God. Enns concludes that, as almost all believers rightly conclude for example; miracles still exist in the world today. They are just not performed by individuals, but rather manifested through the power of the Holy Spirit through the prayer of an individual (among many other possible ways). It would not be difficult to argue those who believe these gifts are still present, and in use, believe so through a re-defining of the sign gifts in just slightly different way than that of a cessationist. In that case it may come down to a proper hermeneutical understanding of Romans and 1 Corinthians. Either way, God’s ability to perform any of the sign gifts has probably never been in question by any orthodox believer, only the medium through which those gifts are performed.

⁸ Wallace.