

Review of Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts

Book: Don Codling, *Sola Scriptura and the Revelatory Gifts: How should Christians Deal with Present Day Prophecy?* (Rice, WA: Sentinel Press, 2005)

On the topic of spiritual gifts, I was informed that Don Codling's book on the topic is one of the best. In this book, the continuationist position that present-day revelatory gifts are still present in the church today is promoted and defended. As an almost self-congratulatory boast, the author claims in the foreword that "no one has made any visible attempt" to respond to his argument (p. 11). I suspect part of the reason why that is the case is less about how sound his arguments are and more about how little known this booklet is and how little effort has been put into trying to refute it. Since he asserts the invincibility of his position, I would think he would certainly welcome anyone taking a shot at his arguments.

This book by Codling sets forward his position that special revelation, through the revelatory gifts (i.e. prophecy, interpretation of prophecy, words of knowledge, interpreted tongues), is still present in the church today but it is non canonical. Codling does a decent job summarizing the major cessationist arguments (pp. 49-60), then the rest of his book he goes around trying to refute those cessationist arguments. The first rebuttal is to an argument that all special revelation is canonical, which is fine since we don't hold to that position. But we will look at the other arguments because that is where he stumbles.

Spiritual gifts and edification

The second cessationist argument that Codling would like to address is "Scripture is sufficient for our needs," and he does this with the title "Grace beyond what is sufficient." Codling expresses his main objection to this argument as follows:

If the gifts are for edification ..., then the church which lacks them is impoverished by that lack. To deny this is to presuppose that the gifts have no value. Assertion of the sufficiency of Scripture does not demonstrate that the gifts have no value, because there was a sufficient Scripture in Paul's day, but the gifts abounded for edification. The point can be illustrated in terms of the sacraments. The church which has the Bible, studies it diligently and applies it, but does not celebrate the sacraments, is an impoverished church. Yet it has the sufficient Scriptures. The point is that while the Bible is sufficient, that church's application of the Bible is not sufficient. The sufficiency of the Bible does not deny the place of the sacraments, rather it established their place. Similarly, the sufficiency of the Bible does not deny a place to the revelatory gifts. (pp. 73-4)

What should we make of this argument? First of all, the analogy with the sacraments is invalid. The sacraments are not word-revelation, but word-act drama. Sacraments do reveal God and the Gospel, BUT only in conjunction with the Word. The sacraments do

not work *ex opere operato*, as what Rome believes. Sacraments are divine sanctioned holy acts, not word-revelation, and thus the analogy does not work.

Secondly, there was NOT a sufficient Scripture in Paul's day. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is not speaking just about the Old Testament Scripture, as Codling thinks (p. 75), but rather everything that is Scripture (*πασα γραφη*). It is not a quantifiable term, but a qualifiable term, viz, everything that fits the genus "Scripture." At the coming of the New Covenant, the current Old Testament revelation is insufficient, thus the creating of a new covenant necessitates a new canon.

The main error of Codling here, which is a common one among charismatics, is that he assumes that no prophecy given today means that there are no prophecies for the edification of the church. We need to take a step back and ask ourselves what era we are living in, and we are living in the New Covenant era. Therefore, the treasures of the apostolic church are ours, for our edification. Therefore, is there any church that lacks the apostolic spiritual gifts for edification? NO, for we have the fruit of their prophecies — the Scriptures. We who are cessationist have the spiritual gift of prophecy, in the apostolic church, for our benefit. We have the spiritual gift of tongues, in the apostolic church, for our benefit, and so on. The church is one and apostolic, and we partake of the benefits of the apostolic church, which are the fruit of the revelatory and sign gifts in the covenant making period of the apostolic church.

Codling follows up with a charge that God withdrawing the gifts because Scripture is sufficient is an act of stinginess, but God is a God of over-abundant blessing (p. 76). That would be true if the sign and revelatory gifts are meant to edify us in the same way as it edifies the apostolic church, but they do not. These gifts edify us best by giving us the fruit of their workings — the Scriptures. So the counter question ought to be: Why should God give us baby gifts when He has already produced from these the complete and mature gift of the New Testament Scriptures for us?

Are revelatory gifts signs of the Apostles?

Codling continues with his third rebuttal, against the argument that revelatory gifts are the signs of the apostles. I do not particularly find this cessationist argument persuasive, since it focuses the attention on the apostles instead of on the apostolic era, on men instead of God. Regardless, I find Codling's attempted rebuttal weak. First, Codling thinks that the cessationist view is that revelatory gifts were given through impartation from the apostles (p. 81). While that is true, that is only part of the argument, which states that the revelatory gifts were given through the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the apostles, not necessarily by the Apostles meting it out as if they decide who to give and who not to give the Holy Spirit. Second, Codling raised the example of Paul's reception of the Holy Spirit directly from God as a counter-example (p. 82). But this ignores the fact that Paul is called to be an apostle so obviously he received the gifts directly from God the Holy Spirit.

Besides this, Codling did score some hits against sloppy argumentation in his response to the use of Hebrews 2:1-4 (pp. 84-5) among others, but this cessationist argument is not a strong one anyway.

Finality of the revelation of Christ

The cessationist argument that is being responded here is that Scripture teaches the finality of special revelation, therefore there is to be no more special revelation today, and thus no more revelatory gifts. Codling attempts to refute this argument by looking at the texts that have been adduced to promote this position. First, he looks at Hebrews 1:1-2. In a startling piece of eisegesis Codling claims that Hebrews 1:1-2 just teach a division between the Old Covenant revelation and New Covenant revelation, and charge that the traditional way of interpretation of this text creates "a new dispensation with an apostolic and a post-apostolic dispensation in place of the new covenant period" (p. 87). But note what the texts actually is saying. Yes, it contrast the former times with the last days. But the former times consist of all the period before Christ, while the last days here has is focused on Christ. Is Christ a definitive revelation, or a continuous revelation? That is the issue which Codling does not address, the quality of that revelation not the seeming duration. It is the revelation of Christ that is definitive and therefore fixed, which militates against continual revelation today. Christ as the Incarnate Word has fully revealed Himself in the Inscripturated, Breathed-out Word, and thus Hebrews 1:1-2 teaches the finality of revelation because Christ's revelation is final in the canon.

Codling next deals with Galatians 1:6, which is a puzzle since it does not deal with cessationism at all. He next touches Revelations 22:18-19, but his argument here is a mess. The point of Revelations 22:18-19 is to prohibit adding to said revelation, so how does that reconcile with the assertion that "this does not preclude direct communication between God and his people" (p. 89)? If there is personal direct communication between God and man today, why should we not add that to the canon as an addition to the Scriptures? One could raise the issue of non-canonical special revelation during the apostolic era, but, since these are the revelation of the later days, their focus is on Christ and partake of the finality of canonical revelation, and thus have ceased according to Hebrews 1:1-2.

Excursus: Non-canonical special revelation

At this point, I would like to deal with the issue of non-canonical special revelation. We know that not all prophecies by New Testament prophets made it into the canon of Scripture, like the prophecies of Philip's four unmarried daughters (Acts 21:9). Codling utilizes these non-canonical prophecies to undermine the finality of revelation, for by decoupling revelation from canon, he can advocate for the continuous presence of the revelatory gifts.

How should we understand these special revelation? We are to understand them like scaffolding, with the canon being the structure. Both structure and scaffold are geared towards one purpose, the revelation of Christ in the later days as what Hebrews 1:1-2

states. But with the completion of the canon and the transition to the post-apostolic era, God's revelation is finalized and thus the scaffolding is dissolved. Was the scaffolding necessary during the inaugurating phase of the New Covenant? Yes, it was. But just as surely, these special revelation are tied to the structure and therefore they have served their purpose. To desire non-canonical special revelation is to ask for the scaffold, which is the same as asking for baby things. We have the final revelation, so why do we need the scaffold that helps to build it?

Revelatory gifts and redemptive history

The last argument that Codling will address is that the revelatory gifts are tied to the initiation of the kingdom of God, which is essentially Richard Gaffin's argument.¹ While Codling has many parts in his argument, he has one main point that I would like to interact with.

Codling's main point is that not all the work of the church is foundational work (pp. 97-8). The problem with this is that it confuses the work of the Spirit in preparing the finality of revelation with the gifts being used explicitly for the foundation of the church. The Spirit gives gifts which manifest in various ways. Some may not be foundational in the strict sense, but they are all needed to create the environment and church life for the revelation of Christ to be written down. Codling is in error here because he takes a too narrow view of what the initiation of the kingdom actually means. Along these lines, Codling's assertions of restriction on the exercise of the gifts at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 14:26 (p. 99) fails because not all revelatory gifts are for the foundation of the revelation of Christ, but they are all required for the kingdom to be inaugurated.

Final refutation

After his attempts to refute cessationist arguments, Codling tried to put forward a positive case for the modern exercise of charismatic gifts. Here, we see how he fails to take into account the difference between the history of salvation (*historia salutis*) and the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*), thinking that Pentecost, while not repeated in full, should be a pattern to be repeated in some manner in the lives of believers (p. 106). Also, he operates from a view that the gifts are there and then presumed they should continue unless otherwise stated (p. 115). But how we should deal with the gifts is to inquire into why they were given in the first place. Their gift was an "exception," not the norm, which is why they are called extraordinary and miracles, instead of ordinary and providence!

Conclusion

Don Codling in his book has tried to prove that the revelatory gifts at least, with an eye to all of the gifts, are present today and can coexist with a high view of the sole authority of Scripture. It is my contention that he has failed. We note that he fails to take into account the church's catholic nature through time in his appeal to the edification of prophecy and

¹ See for example Richard B Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Philipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979)

thus he fails to show how continual prophecy does not undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. Codling also fails to note that a completed revelation is much more of a blessing than having the revelatory gifts, thus reversing the priority of blessing as if incomplete revelation is better than complete revelation. We further note that he fails to take properly into account the focal point of the revelation of Christ in Hebrews 1:1-2 which points to its definite, non-continuous nature, following which we looked at how non-canonical special revelation fits into the biblical paradigm. Lastly, we have seen how Codling confuses the work of the Spirit in preparing the final revelation with foundational work, noting that not everything has to be foundational work in order for it to be necessary for the final revelation.

We ought to go about the topic of spiritual gifts by looking at their purposes first. God is not a God who just does magic tricks to excite and inspire people, or for no reason at all, but He does anything and everything for a reason. Since these sign and revelatory gifts are extraordinary, it should hint to us that they are a dated occurrence. While God does work miracles, let us not be too enamored of the "supernatural" that we become dissatisfied with creation and providence, and look for God and His works in all the wrong places.