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# John Calvin on the gifts of the Holy Spirit in his commentary on Acts

## Abstract

*John Calvin is often considered to have taught the cessation of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. This certainly does not give the complete picture of how Calvin wrestled with those passages from Scripture which deal with the extraordinary gifts. In his commentary on the book of Acts Calvin makes a conscious effort to show that in most of the cases where the gifts of the Spirit are mentioned, the focus is not on the gifts in a general sense, but in an extraordinary sense. These extraordinary gifts had been limited to the initial phase of the church. The reasons that Calvin provides for this cessation is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand Calvin indicates a very specific, divine purpose for the gifts, which limits its usefulness and existence until the point when the purpose had been achieved. However, there are also passages where one gets the impression that the cessation of the gifts was not necessarily divinely intended, but was due to human error. Of great importance is the way Calvin subsequently applies these texts to the readers of his own day.*

**Key Concepts:** John Calvin, Acts of the Apostles, Gifts of the Spirit, Prophecy

## Johannes Calvyn oor die gawes van die Heilige Gees in sy kommentaar op Handeling

*Dikwels word aangeneem dat Johannes Calvyn die beëindiging van die buitengewone gawes van die Heilige Gees voorgestaan het. Dit gee egter nie die volle prentjie van hoe Calvyn met daardie Skrifgedeeltes, waarin die buitengewone gawes behandel word, geworstel het nie. In sy kommentaar op die boek *Handelinge* wys Calvyn bewustelik daarop dat in die meeste gevalle waar die gawes van die Gees genoem word, die fokus nie op die gawes in 'n algemene sin is nie, maar eerder op die gawes in 'n buitengewone sin. Hierdie buitengewone gawes is beperk tot die beginfase van die kerk. Die redes wat Calvyn vir hierdie beëindiging aanvoer, is egter dubbelsinnig. Aan die eenkant wys Calvyn op 'n baie spesifieke, Goddelike doel met die gawes, waardeur hulle bruikbaarheid en voortbestaan beperk word tot die tyd toe die doel bereik is. Aan die anderkant, egter, is daar ook gedeeltes wat die indruk skep dat die beëindiging van die gawes nie noodwendig Goddelik bepaal is nie, maar 'n gevolg was van menslike sonde. Van groot belang is hoe Calvyn hierdie tekste vervolgens toepas op die lesers van sy eie tyd.*

## 1. Introduction

Was John Calvin a cessationist – or even more to the point: the father of cessationism – or was he a continuationist?<sup>1</sup> Few have had any doubts that Calvin belongs to the cessationist camp. Recently, however, some have claimed him to have tended towards continuationism – citing a confidential experience that Calvin supposedly shared with Theodore Beza on his deathbed, which the latter allegedly included in his *Life of Calvin*. The source of this 'historical curio', as Ben Witherington calls it<sup>2</sup>, is an article by Quent Warford, entitled "Calvin speaks unknown tongue", and published in *The Paper*, a student publication of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary on March 24, 1975. Warford writes:

1 For more on this, see e.g. W.A. Grudem, ed. *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); S.B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 223-237.

2 B. Witherington, 'Man of the Bible', <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/september/18.33.html>, visited on September 26th, 2017.

*De Vitam Ilohannes Cauvin [sic]* was published posthumously by Beza. All it contains concerning glossolalia is a small entry, confided to Beza by Calvin, shortly before the latter's death. On several occasions, Calvin, in his devotions, found himself uttering a *lingua non nota et cognota mini*. That is, the language was not known or understood by him. Himself a skilled linguist, Calvin set about to discover the orthography of the utterance. Unable to trace it, he confided to Beza that although the language was Hebraic in character, he yet feared that he had spoken a *lingua barbarorum*. That is, he feared having spoken in an accursed tongue, such as what was spoken by the Canaanites.<sup>3</sup>

Numerous authors have quoted this article uncritically, but none were able, or have made the effort, to verify this from the primary sources. I, for one, could not find this phrase in Beza's *Life of Calvin*.<sup>4</sup> The popularity of this repeated 'mistake' does, however, show the importance attached to Calvin's view on this issue. As one person said in reaction to a 2009 blog-entry about this matter:

I am reasonably certain that a number of Reformed/Presbyterian seminary libraries would pay good money to have a framed copy of this letter of Calvin to Beza to display on their wall – not to mention the acclaim you would receive among Pentecostals for bagging one of their biggest opponents! This would be the biggest theological discovery...<sup>5</sup>

But Calvin cannot that easily be claimed for any one camp, either cessationists or continuationists. Of course, when one has to make a choice between these two options, cessationism certainly seems to be the logical choice. But for several reasons all is not as cut and dried as it may seem. Firstly, because applying this terminology ('cessationist' or 'continuationist') to Calvin, is anachronistic; these categories are from a later date. Secondly and more importantly, Calvin's view on this matter is much more complex than we are led to believe. When Calvin deals with the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, a whole range of other topics enters the discussion, among which are hermeneutics, Scripture, and the unity of the work of the Spirit. It is therefore prudent to carefully dissect Calvin's view on a matter that for many has become so sensitive. In this article I will do this from the limited scope of Calvin's commentary on the book of Acts. Although limited, with this book we step into the Biblical heart of this matter.

In his commentary on Acts Calvin uses two poignant images to illustrate how the Holy Spirit is the source of all gifts. The first image is that of a spring, a single spring that can never run dry (*inexhaustus fons*).<sup>6</sup> From this spring an infinite variety of gifts flow out to the believers. The second image is that of a key. The Spirit is the key (*clavis*) that opens the door for us to enter into all the treasures of spiritual blessings.<sup>7</sup> Both images convey the element of an abundance of gifts. However, what does Calvin exactly mean with the gifts of the Spirit? In what follows a brief and general overview will be given of how Calvin understands the gifts of the Spirit. After that his specific view on the gifts in the book of Acts will be explored in more depth.

3 Q. Warford, 'Calvin Speaks Unknown Tongue', *The Paper: Student Paper of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary* 1.6 (1975): 6.

4 I checked CO 21, where Theodore Beza's *Vita Calvini* as well as Nicolas Colladon's *Vie de Calvin* have been published, for the relevant phrase, but found nothing.

5 See <http://www.oldinthefield.org/?p=411>, visited on September 26th, 2017.

6 For the image of the Spirit as fountain of God's gifts, even for the unbelievers, see also Inst. 2.2.15.

7 Comm. on Acts 2:17, COR XII/1,56,12-14 & 20-22.

## 2. General overview and distinctions

For Calvin the gifts do not come exclusively from the Spirit, but they come from the Triune God. Just as Christ is the primary Giver of the Holy Spirit, he is effectively also the Giver of the gifts. After being himself anointed by the Father with the power of the Spirit (anointment being a metaphor of the gifts of the Spirit)<sup>8</sup>, Christ pours forth the gifts of his Spirit in full measure.<sup>9</sup> However, this does not exclude the activity of the Holy Spirit himself, of whom Calvin says that he has entrusted (*deposuit*) gifts to individuals.<sup>10</sup> Neither does it exclude the activity of God the Father, the source and one Giver of the grace of the Spirit.<sup>11</sup> The gifts of the Spirit, therefore, come from the Triune God.<sup>12</sup>

The gifts of the Spirit are varied, and they are distributed in varied ways. The history of Acts 21:4 displays this variety. There Paul, knowing that he had to go to Jerusalem, heard from the disciples in Tyre that he should not set foot in Jerusalem. But how do the brothers advise through the Spirit against something that Paul has testified that he is doing by the guidance of the self-same Spirit? Is the Spirit self-contradictory? Calvin replies that there are different gifts of the Spirit, and being strong in one gift does not necessarily mean strength in another. The brothers in Tyre clearly received the gift of revelation, of knowing what was going to happen to Paul, but the measure of their gifts did not stretch far enough to also know what Paul's calling demanded.<sup>13</sup> In another instance, Calvin says that Paul was not strong in eloquence, but that his speaking ability was sufficient to make the name of Christ known. However, there are also eloquent ministers chosen by God. This is due to the fact that the gifts of the Spirit are distributed in numerous and varied ways (*ut varia est ac multiplex donorum Spiritus distributio*).<sup>14</sup> Although the apostles all received the fullness of the Spirit, Calvin says, it does not signify an equal measure of gifts in each one, but sufficient for each to execute his office.<sup>15</sup>

The gifts of the Spirit are given for the benefit and edification of the church.<sup>16</sup> In commenting on Simon's offer to buy the gifts of the Spirit in Acts 8:21, Calvin says that these gifts are not acquired by money, but are given by the gratuitous kindness of God for the edification of the church (*Ecclesiae aedificatio*). He goes on to elaborate: "... that each may strive to help his brothers according to the limit of his ability; that each one may unassumingly apply the

8 Comm. on Acts 10:38, COR XII/1, 321, 11-14 & 19-20.

9 Comm. on Acts 1:5, COR XII/1, 22, 24-26; see also P. Elbert, 'Calvin and the Spiritual Gifts', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22/3 (1979): 235-256; Y. Cheng, 'Calvin on the Work of the Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts', in *Calvin in Asian Churches*, vol. 3, ed. S.Y. Lee (Seoul: Presbyterian College and Theological Seminary Press, 2008), 131.

10 Comm. on Acts 18:27, COR XII/1, 150, 36-37.

11 Comm. on Acts 8:17, COR XII/1, 243, 21-25.

12 T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin, an Introduction to His Thought* (London / New York: Continuum, 1995), 78.

13 Comm. on Acts 21:4, COR XII/2, 197, 25-33.

14 Comm. on Acts 18:24, COR XII/2, 148, 18-24; see also comm. on Acts 8:16, COR XII/1, 242, 29-30.

15 Comm. on Acts 2:3, COR XII/1, 50, 4-7.

16 See P. Elbert, 'Calvin and the Spiritual Gifts', 238-240; D. Mashau, 'John Calvin's Theology of the Charismata: Its Influence on the Reformed Confessions and Its Implications for the Church's Mission', *Missionalia* 36/1 (2008): 89-90; L. Sweetman, 'The Gifts of the Spirit: A Study of Calvin's Comments on 1 Corinthians 12:8-20, 28; Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11', in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. D.E. Holwerda (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1976), 274-284; see also Calvin's comm. on Acts 8:16, Rom. 12:7-8, 1 Cor. 14:12 and 1 Pet. 4:10.

gift that he has received for the common benefit of the church."<sup>17</sup> And in his commentary on Acts 18:27 Calvin confirms once more that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were entrusted to individuals for the edification of the church (*ad Ecclesiae aedificatio*).<sup>18</sup>

When speaking about the gifts of the Spirit, Calvin's vocabulary is fluid. Not surprisingly, he most often uses the term *donum*. However, on a regular basis he would also use the term 'graces' (*gratiae*), thereby stressing the gracious character of these gifts.<sup>19</sup> In some instances the term 'miracles' (*miracula*) can also be found in the context of Calvin's discussion of the gifts.

When speaking about the healing power of Peter's shadow in Acts 5:15, Calvin says that the gift (*donum*) of healing was used by the apostles for promoting the Gospel, whereas the Papists use their miracles (*miracula*) for the purpose of leading the world away from Christ.<sup>20</sup> Here the term 'miracles' could possibly be perceived as only applying to what the Papists call miracles, and standing in opposition to the biblical gifts. However, from Calvin's commentary on two other passages, Acts 10:44 and 19:1, it becomes clear that he has no problem calling, at least some gifts, miracles. On Acts 10:44 Calvin says that God confirms by a new miracle (*novo miraculo confirmat Deus*) that the Gentiles also share in the teaching of the Gospel, referring to the gifts of tongues and prophecy, while shortly afterwards talking about this new miracle as 'these gifts' (*haec dona*).<sup>21</sup> And when starting his commentary on Acts 19, Calvin says that the church at Ephesus was provided with a miracle (*miraculum*; again referring to the gifts of tongues and prophecy), in that the visible graces of the Spirit were conferred on certain new disciples.<sup>22</sup> It seems from the above examples that at least the gifts of healing and tongues<sup>23</sup> are considered by Calvin to be miracles. From the next paragraph it will be seen that all the extraordinary gifts are generally considered by Calvin to fall in this category. However, it should also be noted that gifts and miracles are not to be identified, as can be seen from Calvin's summary in Acts 5:17, where he says that Luke has informed us that the church had been increased in numbers, that it had been equipped with various gifts (*varies dotes*), and that it excelled in miracles (*miracula*), thereby distinguishing between the two.<sup>24</sup>

In a few instances there is also a combination of the term 'gift' with another concept, the term 'sign' (*signum*). This is particularly apparent in Calvin's commentary on the phenomena associated with Pentecost.<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Calvin's remark on Acts 2:3, where he says that the tongues were a sign of the presence of the Spirit, and in the next sentence continues his

17 Comm. on Acts 8:21, COR XII/1, 246, 20-24.

18 Comm. on Acts 18:27, COR XII/2, 150, 34-37.

19 See for *gratiae* Calvin's commentary on Acts 9:17, 10:44, 11:16 and 19:1-2, often qualified with 'visible' (*visibiles*). E. Evans, 'Theologian of the Holy Spirit', *Reformation & Revival. A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership* 10/4 (2001): 83-105, is therefore not accurate when he states that, for Calvin, "maturity in the Christian life lies in the graces rather than in the gifts of the Spirit", as Calvin uses these terms interchangeably.

20 Comm. on Acts 5:15, COR XII/1, 145, 33-35 & 146, 4-9.

21 Comm. on Acts 10:44, COR XII/1, 327, 19-20 & 24.

22 Comm. on Acts 19:1, COR XII/2, 153, 6-8.

23 For speaking in tongues as both gift and miracle, see Calvin's comm. on Acts 2:4-6, 12 as well as Acts 2:38.

24 Comm. on Acts 5:17, COR XII/1, 147, 1-2; see also comm. on Acts 6:8, COR XII/1, 170, 9-11.

25 See Calvin's comm. on Acts 2:2-4.

thought by talking about the gifts.<sup>26</sup> And in his commentary on Acts 10:44 the three terms (gifts, miracles and signs) are used together.<sup>27</sup> For Calvin the important aspect of the signs is that it has a referential function. This enables him to take his readers along in observing the analogy (*analogia*) of the signs of wind, tongues and fire in Acts 2:2.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly Calvin's stock term is 'gifts', but as a particular characteristic of these extraordinary gifts, he can also refer to some of them as miracles, divine works that surpass our natural understanding. Furthermore, these gifts do not function independently, but in their miraculous character they always refer to and strengthen the preaching of the Gospel, thereby functioning as signs.<sup>29</sup> This last aspect – the referential function of the signs – is crucial for understanding Calvin's view on the laying on of hands as the means by which the gifts of the Spirit were conferred, in particular during the time of the early church. The laying on of hands was used for two purposes: to confer the visible graces of the Spirit on someone, or to dedicate someone to God (for the ministry or at the profession of faith).<sup>30</sup> In his debate with the Roman Church on this point, Calvin admits that the laying on of hands was a sacrament for conferring the gifts of the Spirit. However, the laying on of hands is not a sacrament on the same level as baptism and the Lord's Supper, because there are perpetual and temporary sacraments, and the laying on of hands is an example of the latter. Calvin does not have a problem to continue using the laying on of hands to confirm adults in the profession of faith, although people should not think that the grace of the Spirit is tied to this ceremony.<sup>31</sup> But he accuses the Papists for prolonging this sign for conferring the gifts of the Spirit while the reality of the gifts does not exist anymore. The sign only has meaning when it signifies the reality, but since the reality was only for a time the sign had served its purpose.<sup>32</sup> Here the laying on of hands becomes illustrative for Calvin's view on the gifts in the book of Acts.

### 3. Focus on the extraordinary

In his commentary on Acts Calvin often mentions or discusses the relationship between the gifts of the Spirit in a general sense and the extraordinary or special gifts of the Spirit.<sup>33</sup> By the former he means the grace of our renewal or regeneration (including faith, the remission of sin, newness of life, and the grace of sanctification), while the latter refers to the visible graces, "the gifts of tongues, prophecy, interpretation, healings, and similar

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26 Comm. on Acts 2:3, COR XII/1, 50, 2-6.

27 Comm. on Acts 10:44, COR XII/1,327,19-24.

28 Comm. on Acts 2:2, COR XII/1,48,3-4.

29 See e.g. comm. on Acts 5:12, COR XII/1, 144, 14-15; comm. on Acts 14:3, COR XII/2,5,12-27.

30 Comm. on Acts 9:17, COR XII/1, 275, -16; the same is explained in Inst. 4.3.16. See Calvin's comm. on Acts 8:17, COR XII/1,243,21-25 and Acts 19:5, COR XII/2,156,7-14, for the first purpose, and his comm. on Acts 6:6, COR XII/1,168,21-32, Acts 13:3, COR XII/1,366,17-25 and Acts 20:8, COR XII/2,305,8-9, for the second purpose. For more on Calvin's view on the connection between the laying on of hands and baptism in the Roman Church, see H.H. van Alten, 'Die Belang van Onderrig in die Beginfase van die Kerk. Johannes Calvyn as Kategeet in sy Kommentaar op die Boek Handelingne', *Koers* 74/4 (2009): 661-682.

31 Comm. on Acts 19:5, COR XII/2, 156, 21-32.

32 Comm. on Acts 8:16, COR XII/1, 243, 1-7.

33 See e.g. comm. on Acts 8:16, COR XII/1,242,10-13; sometimes, e.g. in Acts 15:7, Calvin would also apply the qualification 'special' (*peculiari*) of the grace of the Spirit to faith – thus, also in this regard his vocabulary is flexible.

things (*et similia notari*)..."<sup>34</sup>The connection between the general and the extraordinary is undeniable, as Calvin articulates in his commentary on Acts 15:7 ("Peter connects the visible graces of the Spirit, which he mentions, to faith...")<sup>35</sup>, but how exactly do they relate to each other?

The former, although called 'general', is deemed by Calvin to be supreme (*praecipua*).<sup>36</sup> The latter, despite being considered by the reformer to be miracles (see e.g. his commentary on Acts 10:44), are ultimately only additions (*accessio*)<sup>37</sup> – added as a culmination to the Spirit of adoption that was already conferred on the Samaritans<sup>38</sup>, God's seal on the faith and godliness of those who heard Peter's preaching<sup>39</sup>, and signs of approval of the apostles' teaching.<sup>40</sup> Calvin's commentary on Acts 5:32 aptly illustrates this relationship. There the reformer says that the illumination of the Spirit precedes (*praecedit*) faith, seeing that it is the cause (*causa*) of faith, but afterwards (*postea*) other graces follow, in accordance with the words in Matthew 13:12: "To him who has, it will be given."<sup>41</sup> The same can be seen from his commentary on Acts 2:18 – for those whom God has adopted into his family and designed by his Spirit to serve him, he afterwards (*postea*) also furnishes with new gifts.<sup>42</sup> Or in somewhat different, but very interesting, terms: "Those who believe in Christ are handsomely rewarded by God for their obedience."<sup>43</sup> It is clear that the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit follow the general gifts in time as well as in priority.

Despite the importance of establishing this order in time and priority, Calvin makes a conscious effort to show that in most of the cases in the book of Acts where the gifts of the Spirit are mentioned, the focus is not on the gifts in a general sense, but in an extraordinary sense.<sup>44</sup> It even seems as if the reformer considers the general grace of the Spirit to be a given, not in the least unimportant but nonetheless preceding the primary focus of the book of Acts. It is as if the reformer of Geneva looks at the extraordinary gifts as a particularization of faith.<sup>45</sup>

This already starts in Acts 1:5, where Calvin comments that it seems absurd that John's words, repeated by Jesus in this verse and spoken in general of the grace of regeneration, should be confined to the visible sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. His reply is that Christ did not baptize with the Spirit only at Pentecost, but that he had conferred this baptism on his disciples before, and thus baptizes all the elect daily.<sup>46</sup> The implication is that, in Calvin's

34 Comm. on Acts 5:32, COR XII/1, 156, 12-14.

35 Comm. on Acts 15:7, COR XII/2, 36, 11-13.

36 Comm. on Acts 2:38, COR XII/1, 83, 22-23.

37 Comm. on Acts 2:38, COR XII/1, 83, 23-24; comm. on Acts 15:7, COR XII/2, 36, 12-13.

38 Comm. on Acts 8:16, COR XII/1, 242, 18-20.

39 Comm. on Acts 10:44, COR XII/1, 327, 2 5-26.

40 Comm. on Acts 5:32, COR XII/1, 156, 5-6.

41 Comm. on Acts 5:32, COR XII/1, 156, 15-17.

42 Comm. on Acts 2:18, COR XII/1, 59, 6-8.

43 Comm. on Acts 5:32, COR XII/1, 156, 8-9.

44 See comm. on Acts 2:38, 5:32, 6:5, 8:16, 10:44, 11:16, 19:1-5.

45 See comm. on Acts 19:2, COR XII/2, 153, 30: ... *ut de forum fide certius habeat examen*.

46 Comm. on Acts 1:5, COR XII/1, 2, 14-19.



view, the visible outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, although certainly not excluding the aspect of the general grace, has a different focus. This is confirmed when, in commenting on chapter 2:38, he says that this passage should not be taken as referring to the grace of sanctification, which is conferred upon all the believers in common. Rather, what is promised here to the listeners in Jerusalem is the gift of the Spirit of which they saw an example in the diversity of tongues.<sup>47</sup> This application of the gifts of the Spirit to the extraordinary and special, rather than to the general, subsequently becomes a pattern in all of the classical passages in Acts that deal with the visible outpouring of the Spirit.

Luke's comment in Acts 8:16, that the Samaritans had only been baptized in the name of Christ, brings Calvin to the question whether they were not yet sharers of the Spirit. However, in his answer he is very clear that in baptism the Spirit gives the believers all they need – the washing of sins, newness of life and sanctification. Therefore, the Samaritans, once baptized, were not only clothed with Christ but also with the Spirit. Calvin's conclusion is, therefore, that Luke is not speaking here about the general grace of the Spirit (*de communi Spiritus gratia*) by which God regenerates us, but about those special gifts (*de singularibus illis donis*) with which the Lord wished to endow the believers during the first days of the Gospel. In the same vein he then goes on to interpret John 7:39 – the disciples were at that stage not completely without the Spirit, as they would otherwise not have been able to believe and follow Christ, but rather the extraordinary gifts (*sed quia nondum pollebant eximiis donis*) with which the kingdom of Christ started shining since Pentecost were not yet given to them.<sup>48</sup> In his commentary on Acts 11:16 Calvin makes his readers aware of the fact that, generally speaking, Christ uses the word 'Spirit' to describe the gifts of tongues and similar things as well as the whole grace of our renewal, before choosing to apply it in this specific instance to the visible graces of the Spirit. This choice, however, does not mean a restriction, because the part represents the whole – in bestowing the visible graces of the Spirit on the apostles, Christ testified that he is the one and only source of purity, righteousness and complete regeneration.<sup>49</sup>

Calvin's commentary on Acts 19:1-5 is probably the most detailed on this point. Anticipating the conclusion of this history Calvin, right at the beginning of verse 2 already, states that Paul is not speaking about the Spirit of regeneration, but of the special gifts distributed by God at the beginning of the Gospel.<sup>50</sup> This is also his explanation for the Ephesian disciples' ignorance about the Holy Spirit – after all, Paul was not speaking in general terms about the Spirit, and these men were not denying knowledge of the Spirit as such, but of the visible graces with which God had decorated the kingdom of his Son.<sup>51</sup> As a result Calvin, in his commentary on verse 5, can deny that the baptism of water was repeated. Rather, the name of baptism is transferred to the outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit, as was already seen in Acts 1:5 and 11:16.<sup>52</sup>

For Calvin the special and extraordinary gifts of the Spirit take centre stage in the book of Acts, while the general gifts of faith and regeneration are more of a background reality. While clearly understanding that both come from the same Spirit and cannot be separated, Calvin

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47 Comm. on Acts 2:38, COR XII/1, 83, 25-27.

48 Comm. on Acts 8:16, COR XII/1, 242, 2-18.

49 Comm. on Acts 11:16, COR XII/1, 335, 18-19 & 21-24.

50 Comm. on Acts 19:2, COR XII/2, 153, 12-14.

51 Comm. on Acts 19:3, COR XII/2, 154, 3-5; here Calvin introduces the style figure of metonymy, where the word 'Spirit' stands for something intimately related to it, in this case the visible gifts of the Spirit.

52 Comm. on Acts 19:5, COR XII/2, 156, 1-5.

regularly indicates their distinction and chooses for the extraordinary as the most suitable explanation of key passages in the book of Acts. However, this begs the question how the reformer of Geneva, well known for his ability to apply the biblical text to the contemporary situation, understood the meaning of the extraordinary gifts to be relevant to his readers.

#### 4. Meaning and relevance

In almost all the passages mentioned above Calvin includes an important qualification, whereby the occurrence of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit is limited to the specific time of the apostles.<sup>53</sup> In his commentary on Acts 8:16 Calvin says that in the beginning of the Gospel (*initium Euangelii*) God wanted some to be endowed with the special gifts of the Spirit.<sup>54</sup> For a time (*ad tempus*) he wanted to show his church something like the visible presence of his Spirit; even the Papists, who want to perpetuate what was a temporary sign, are forced to acknowledge that the church received these gifts only for a time (*ad tempus*).<sup>55</sup> The miracle of the visible gifts was typical of the inauguration (*exordium*) of Christ's kingdom.<sup>56</sup> But this time is behind us, and Calvin is clear that these gifts have long since ceased in the church.<sup>57</sup> The extraordinary and visible gifts of the Spirit had been limited to the initial phase of the church.<sup>58</sup> Or at the very least, instances of them were so rare that we may conclude that they were not equally common to all ages.<sup>59</sup>

However, the reasons that Calvin provides for this cessation make one suspect that his view is somewhat more complex than it appears at first glance. On the one hand Calvin indicates a very specific, divine purpose for the gifts, which limits its usefulness and existence until the point when the purpose had been achieved.<sup>60</sup> God's purpose with the visible gifts of the Spirit was to establish forever (*in perpetuum*) the authority of the Gospel and add lustre to the kingdom of Christ, and thereby also testifying that the Spirit will always be the Governor and Director of the believers.<sup>61</sup> The gift of tongues was for the adornment and honour of the Gospel, and God gave it for the purpose of illuminating the greatness of the heavenly

53 The same is found in his commentary on Acts 5:32, 8:16, 10:4, 10:44, 10:46 and 19:1-2.

54 Comm. on Acts 8:16, COR XII/1,242,12; see for the same expression Calvin's comm. on Acts 19:2, COR XII/2,153,13-14.

55 Comm. on Acts 8:16, COR XII/1,242,21 & 243,4-5; see for the same expression Calvin's comm. on Acts 2:38, COR XII/1,83,29.

56 Comm. on Acts 2:38, COR XII/1,83,29; see also Calvin's sermon on Acts 4:24b-31, SC 8,110,28-29, where he says that the miracles were only for a time and are no longer the same as they were back then.

57 Comm. on Acts 10:44, COR XII/1, 328, 1-2; see also comm. on Acts 2:17, COR XII/1, 58, 30.

58 See also Inst. 4.3.8 and 4.19.18.

59 Comm. on Mark 16:17, CO 45,825.

60 See Calvin's discussion of the laying on of hands in the context of dealing with the cessation of the gifts, comm. on Acts 8:16-17, COR XII/1, 243, 5-7, 26-28. In this context he says that the laying on of hands came to an end when the purpose of it was served. "But let us remember that the laying on of hands was God's instrument, thereby conferring the visible grace of the Spirit on his own at the appropriate time, and that since the church has been deprived of such gifts this act is merely an empty form."

61 Comm. on Acts 8:16, COR XII/1, 242, 20-23 & 27-28; see P.F. Jensen, 'Calvin, Charismatics and Miracles', *The Evangelical Quarterly* 51/3 (1979): 140-142; E.A. de Boer, *The Genevan School of the Prophets* [Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, No. DXII] (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2012), 19-33.



wisdom<sup>62</sup>; the supreme glory of the Gospel was visible in the spiritual gifts.<sup>63</sup> Once this purpose of establishing the Gospel and the kingdom in the initial phase of the church had been achieved, the gifts ceased to exist.

However, there are also passages where one gets the impression that the cessation of the gifts was not necessarily divinely intended, but was due to human error. In his commentary on Acts 10:4 Calvin puts it down to our own ingratitude that we do not see a richer abundance of the gifts of the Spirit today, but rather a withering away of the greater part of them.<sup>64</sup> Ambition, ostentation and display corrupted the gift of tongues – referring to the case of the Corinthians – so that a little later (*paulo post*) God took away what he had given.<sup>65</sup>

Calvin is, therefore, not wholly unambiguous in his view on the cessation of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit.<sup>66</sup> On the one hand he closes the door on any expectation of receiving the visible and extraordinary gifts of the Spirit in his own days, because it had served its divine purpose of establishing the kingdom and the Gospel during those initial stages of the church.<sup>67</sup> But on the other hand he raises the expectation by exhorting his readers to eliminate the reasons – ingratitude, ambition, and slothfulness – for the decline and the cessation of the gifts, thereby implying a possible restoration. In his commentary on Acts 5:32 he tells his readers that, if we want to be continually enriched with new gifts of the Spirit, we should lay bare the bosom of faith to God.<sup>68</sup>

Calvin's way of solving this ambiguity is to 'reverse' the order of his expository thinking. First, as indicated above, he explains several times that the passages in question are not about the general grace of faith and regeneration, but about the extraordinary gifts given by the Lord for that specific time, thus narrowing down its scope. However, in subsequently applying these passages to his readers, he lifts this qualification and broadens his exposition

62 Comm. on Acts 10:46, COR XII/1, 328, 29-32.

63 Comm. on Acts 19:2, COR XII/2, 153, 23-25.

64 Comm. on Acts 10:4, COR XII/1, 298, 15-17; see also comm. on Acts 2:17, COR XII/1, 58, 32-33; comm. on Acts 5:32, COR XII/1, 156, 19-20. A similar argument can be found in Calvin's sermon on Ephesians 4:11-12.

65 Comm. on Acts 10:46, COR XII/1, 328, 31-35.

66 See Calvin's comm. on Mark 16:17, CO 45,825, where a good reflection of his ambiguity on this point can be found: "Though Christ does not expressly state whether he intends this gift to be temporary, or to remain perpetually in his church, yet it is more probable that miracles were promised only for a time, in order to give luster to the Gospel, while it was new and in a state of obscurity. It is possible, no doubt, that the world may have been deprived of this honor through the guilt of its own ingratitude, but I think that the true design for which miracles were appointed was, that nothing which was necessary for proving the doctrine of the Gospel should be wanting at its commencement. And certainly we see that the use of them ceased not long afterwards, or, at least, that instances of them were so rare as to entitle us to conclude that they would not be equally common in all ages." Something similar is found in Calvin's *Interim adultero-germanum*, CO 7,628-629: "It is notorious that the gifts of the Spirit, which were then given by the laying on of hands, sometime after ceased to be conferred. Whether this was owing to the ingratitude of the world, or because the doctrine of the Gospel had already been sufficiently distinguished by the miracles of nearly a hundred years, is of no consequence..." See also D. Mashau, 'John Calvin's Theology of the Charismata', 90-91; W. Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1957), 329-332.

67 W.H.Th. Moehn, *God Roept Ons tot Zijn Dienst. Een Homiletisch Onderzoek Naar de Verhouding tussen God en Hoorder in Calvijn's Preken over Handelingen 4:1-6:7* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1996), 240-242, draws the same conclusion with regards to the miracles in Acts. The miracles were intended for the time of the apostles and do not exist in the same way anymore (SC 8,110,27-28); their purpose was to seal the Gospel (SC 8,138,29-30) and to glorify the kingdom of Christ (SC 8,139,7). See also Calvin's comm. on Acts 5:12, COR XII/1, 144, 17-19.

68 Comm. on Acts 5:32, COR XII/1, 156, 17-19.

in order to be relevant for his own time. In his commentary on Acts 2:38, for example, Calvin says that the words of Peter – “you shall receive the gift of the Spirit” – apply in a measure (*aliquatenus*) to the whole church.

For although we do not receive the Spirit to the end that we may speak with tongues, or be prophets, or cure the sick, or work miracles, yet he is given to us for a better use, that we may believe with the heart unto righteousness, that our tongues may be trained to true confession that we may pass from death to life, that we who are poor and empty may be made rich, and that we may sound victorious against Satan and the world.<sup>69</sup>

The same is found in his commentary on Acts 10:44, where the concession that the gift of tongues and other things of that kind have long since ceased in the church, is countered with the conviction that the Spirit of understanding and regeneration, united with the external preaching of the Gospel, thrives and will always thrive.<sup>70</sup> This broadening of the extraordinary gifts to the gifts in general allows Calvin to rebuke the ingratitude and slothfulness of his contemporaries<sup>71</sup> and exhort them to search for continual enrichment with new gifts of the Spirit.<sup>72</sup>

When the question is asked as to the underlying principles, which allow – or maybe even force – Calvin to broaden the application, the following can be suggested. Firstly, Calvin’s view on the source of the gifts is an important factor. All the gifts, general and extraordinary, flow from the one source, the Holy Spirit of Christ.<sup>73</sup> This single, divine source affords Calvin the freedom to apply, what was specifically meant for the early church, in a general way to the church of his own day. Secondly, Calvin leaves no doubt as to the value of the general and extraordinary gifts respectively. He deems the remission of sins and newness of life to be the most important (*praecipua*) gifts<sup>74</sup>, while the extraordinary gifts are, in some sense, mere additions. Even though we do not have the extraordinary gifts anymore, the Spirit is continually given us for a better use (*nobis tamen in praestantiorem usum datur*). It is therefore, in the reformer’s view, no impoverishment when the contemporary church is promised the continued presence of the Spirit, not so much for the gifts of tongues and healing, but for faith, true confession and victory over Satan and the world.<sup>75</sup> And, finally, Calvin’s emphasis on the close connection between the Spirit and the Word should be mentioned. According to the reformer the purpose of the Biblical miracles, including the extraordinary gifts, was to confirm the Word of God. Faith is, therefore, not based on the miraculous; rather, miracles are there to adorn the Word. And since the Word has been firmly established since the early beginnings of the church, the need for the extraordinary gifts has ceased. The preached Word is the real power, and the miracles we have today are those recorded in Scripture.<sup>76</sup>

69 Comm. on Acts 2:38, COR XII/1, 83, 31-35 & 84, 1-3.

70 Comm. on Acts 10:44, COR XII/1, 328, 1-4; in his sermon on Acts 5:13-16, SC 8, 140, 27-33, Calvin acknowledges that miracles of healing are not manifested openly in our day, but that Christ is still our spiritual physician (*nostrae medecin spirituel*) whom we need to cure the illnesses of our souls.

71 Comm. on Acts 10:4, COR XII/1, 298, 15-17.

72 See comm. on Acts 5:32, COR XII/1, 156, 18-19.

73 Comm. on Acts 2:17, COR XII/1, 56, 12-14.

74 Comm. on Acts 2:38, COR XII/1, 83, 22-23.

75 Comm. on Acts 2:38, COR XII/1, 83, 35 & 84, 1-3.

76 P.F. Jensen, ‘Calvin, Charismatics and Miracles’, 142; see the explicit connection of Word and Spirit in Calvin’s comm. on Acts 10:44, COR XII/1, 328, 1-4.

## 5. The specific case of prophecy

The importance of the preached Word justifies a brief excursion on the topic of prophecy, as these two are closely related in Calvin's mind.

In his commentary on Acts 17:30, Calvin merely mentions the prophetic office (*propheticus munus*) without discussing it. In light of what will follow in this paragraph, though, it is important to note the context, namely that of the preaching of the Gospel. Calvin says that God is the one directing the prophetic office, and only in this way can the Gospel have full authority.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, in Acts 13 "prophets and teachers" are considered by Calvin to be synonymous, both referring to the great many men in the church of Antioch endowed with the special gift of the Spirit of teaching. According to Calvin outstanding interpreters of Scripture are meant, and not men who were strong in the gift of foretelling.<sup>78</sup> Speaking of the gift of foretelling, in his commentary on Acts 21 there is an elaborate discussion of, what Calvin calls, the office of prophesying (*quomodo functae sint puellae istae prophetandi officio, incertum est*).<sup>79</sup> Calvin says in this chapter regarding the four daughters of Philip, who were endowed with the Spirit of prophecy that God wanted to give lustre to the beginning of the Gospel with this gift of predicting coming events.<sup>80</sup> In this particular instance prophecy is defined as predicting the future, which does not seem to be in line with his other comments mentioned thus far.

Interpreting Scripture or predicting the future – these two alternatives are also discussed by Calvin in his commentary on Ephesians 4:11.<sup>81</sup> There he differs from those who understand prophets to possess the gift of predicting future events, and understands this office to refer to distinguished interpreters of prophecies. By a remarkable gift of revelation they applied the prophecies to the subjects they were dealing with. He ends his discussion of the prophets in Ephesians 4 by adding that the gift of prophecy (meaning prediction of the future), which usually accompanied these prophets' doctrinal instruction, is not excluded.<sup>82</sup> In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:28 Calvin gives a similar definition, saying that the term 'prophets' does not mean those who were endowed with the gift of prophesying, but those who were endowed with a peculiar gift, not merely for interpreting Scripture, but also applying it wisely for present use. He then goes on to state his reason for this choice, saying that Paul prefers prophecy to all other gifts, on the ground that it contributes more to edification, a commendation that would not be applicable to the predicting of future events.<sup>83</sup>

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77 Comm. on Acts 17:30, COR XII/2, 130, 17.

78 Comm. on Acts 13:1, COR XII/1, 362, 3-7.

79 Comm. on Acts 21:9, COR XII/2, 200, 6-7.

80 Comm. on Acts 21:9, COR XII/2, 199, 22-24.

81 See also E.A. McKee, *Elders and the Plural Ministry. The Role of Exegetical History in Illuminating John Calvin's Theology* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1988), 137-139, for more on the exegetical history of Ephesians 4:11. E.A. de Boer, *The Genevan School of the Prophets* [Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, No. DXII] (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2012), chapter 1, discusses the origin of the Bible studies in Zurich, Strasbourg and Geneva. In Zurich these Bible studies were actually called *Prophezei*, and were understood as opening up and explaining the meaning of Scripture. Prophecy thus became the equivalent of biblical exposition, and the related gift of languages was understood as knowledge of the biblical and classical languages (Hebrew, Greek and Latin). See also W. de Greef, 'Calvin on Prophecy', in *Ordentlich und fruchtbar. Festschrift für Willem van't Spijker*, ed. W.H. Neuser and H.J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Uitgeverij J.J. Groenen Zoon, 1997), 111-128.

82 Comm. on Ephesians 4:11, COR II/XVI, 229f.

83 Comm. on 1 Corinthians 12:28, CO 49,506-507.

Note how Calvin in his commentaries on Ephesians 4:11 as well as 1 Corinthians 12:28 implicitly equates the gift of prophesying with the prediction of the future. And this makes his comments in the Ephesians and Corinthians commentaries interesting – he seems to distinguish between the office of prophet and the gift of prophesying. Whereas one might think that these two are closely connected, and that the gift of prophesying (i.e. foretelling the future) is a necessary prerequisite for being a prophet, Calvin rather discusses them as two distinct functions. He associates the office of prophet with interpreting and applying Scripture, while the gift of prophesying is understood as foretelling future events. It seems that Calvin does not wholly exclude the element of foretelling the future from the prophetic office, but it is clearly not the distinctive characteristic of this office. The reformer is also clear that the gift of prophesying, although being restored in order to make people more attentive to hear the new voice (*nova vox*) of the Gospel and adorn the new reign (*novum regnum*) of Christ, only flourished for a short time, after which it ceased to exist.<sup>84</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The nature of the book of Acts forces Calvin to consider and articulate his position on the gifts of the Spirit. Theology as well as reality play their part in determining his stance: theology, because God wanted to adorn the Gospel and establish the kingdom in the initial phase, after which the necessity of the gifts ceased (although human sinfulness also seems to have played its part in the cessation of the gifts); and reality, because the occurrence of the gifts after the initial stage was so rare, that one can conclude that they were only intended for that period.

The cessation of the gifts, however, does not render these Scripture passages irrelevant for the sixteenth century or, for that matter, for our own day. The reformer uses the fact that both the general and the extraordinary gifts come from the same Spirit, to move from the extraordinary to the general in his application. Ultimately the general gifts of faith, forgiveness of sins and new life are most important, and this fact, in Calvin's mind, validates his application of the extraordinary gifts to the general life of faith of the believers of his days. His application even seems to enter the realm of the allegorical, when the miracle of the speaking in tongues is applied as being true confession with the tongue, and when the gift of healing is applied to Christ as our spiritual physician.

This article has hopefully made clear that claiming Calvin for either a cessationist or continuationist position is not as easy as it may seem at first glance. Calvin is ever the man of the *via media*, finding his way – both exegetically and doctrinally – between the extremes. This makes him intriguing and helpful, not the least in a discussion where extreme positions have been the norm rather than the exception.

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<sup>84</sup> Comm. on Acts 21:9, COR XII/2, 199, 24-33 & 200, 1-6.

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