

# Just Exactly What Am I Missing? – Part 1

## How the Spirit's Written Revelation Indulges My Cessationism

### By Jerry Wragg

I am a cessationist. To be honest, I was taught early on as a believer that the miraculous sign gifts operating in the New Testament had ceased, so I wasn't without primitive bias. But the biblical arguments made sense to me at the time and seemed compelling, especially given the glaring *absence of any identical phenomena* throughout church history. Oh sure, there have been numerous claims through the centuries. But in all of these cases, none of the alleged works of the Spirit had any resemblance to the NT sign gifts. They were consistently viewed as dubious by the protestant majority. Contemporary charismatic phenomena suffer the same embarrassing lack of real proof that God is actually behind modern claims. Conspicuously missing in all these cases are 'signs and wonders' *verifiably identical* to what is recorded in the New Testament. This is no small mismatch, and contemporary scholars within the most conservative wing of the charismatic movement have conceded the difference. Continuationists, as they've often called themselves, maintain that the Spirit is bestowing spiritual gifts of a prodigious nature today, but they readily admit that contemporary phenomena are *not the same* as that of the first century.

#### ***Unholy Hunches***

Wayne Grudem, for example, concludes that the prophet and Apostle were unique revelatory offices, both of which ceased with the closing of the Canon. But he also argues that the early church exercised a different gift of prophecy *not like* that of the Old or New Testaments. The Spirit's continuing prophetic gift—to be sought by all believers—is non-authoritative and for the purpose of mutual edification.

He writes, "I am suggesting... the possibility that prophecy in ordinary New Testament churches was not equal to Scripture in authority, but was simply a very human and sometimes partially mistaken report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone's mind."<sup>[1]</sup>

For Grudem, ongoing prophecy in the church is the practice of edifying one another by speaking encouraging thoughts brought to mind by the Spirit in the moment. The principal implication of this view, he says, is that God's people experience "the spontaneous powerful working of the Holy Spirit, giving 'edification, encouragement, and comfort' which speaks directly to the needs of the moment and causes people to realize that 'truly God is among you' (1 Cor 14:25)."<sup>[2]</sup> Grudem apparently concludes that the Spirit never intended His written word to sufficiently edify, encourage and comfort His people. Instead of experiencing daily faith-building strength through the Scriptures alone, we should seek more intimate guidance through "spontaneous, powerful," but "sometimes mistaken" reports He is possibly giving to others for our need. You can now see the problem with this idea. Even if I were a continuationist, compared to the unrivaled power of Scripture Grudem's modern gift holds no attraction whatsoever. It's simply a matter of comparable authority and power. God's word is righteous, authoritative, and proves utterly sufficient for the kind of encouragement Grudem's 'gift' only fallibly delivers.

With today's so-called gift, I can't ever truly know if a 'prophecy' spoken over me is directly from God, or even accurate. In fact, potentially fallible prophecies are pointless. Even if I was somehow persuaded that one of my inner-notions was a word from the living God for His church today, I wouldn't deliver the message for the sheer terror of fouling it up! This is the modern charismatic's folly. People run around declaring things to one another without a hint of fear that the message could merely be the mental chatter of a self-absorbed heart. And if every one of today's prophecies *could be* nothing more than verbalizing fallen humanity, then they are unnecessary and always potentially

harmful. Given this inevitable guessing game, can I be blamed for desiring something far more trustworthy? Can I help it if I'm compelled to trust exclusively in the Spirit's immutable and unfailing written word?

### ***Encrypted Lingo***

Another highly respected scholar, D.A. Carson, has acknowledged that contemporary 'tongues' are not like the NT gift—extant languages supernaturally spoken by those who hadn't previously learned them. In his formidable study of First Corinthians 12-14,

*Carson explains: ...[contemporary] tongues may bear cognitive information even though they are not known human languages—just as a computer program is a 'language' that conveys a great deal of information, even though it is not a 'language' that anyone actually speaks. You have to know the code to be able to understand it. Such a pattern of verbalization could not be legitimately dismissed as gibberish. It is as capable of conveying propositional and cognitive content as any known language. 'Tongue' and 'language' still seem eminently reasonable words to describe the phenomenon.[3]*

Carson admits that contemporary versions of the gift of tongues are not equal to those bestowed by the Spirit in the early church. The NT gift, as with all the "sign" gifts, brought immediate clarity and edification to God's people. And their unmistakable miraculous nature attested that the message was from God and therefore binding. New Testament tongues were known languages heard by those who wouldn't have understood nor have been edified, unless the message came in their native tongue. Carson concludes that the tongues-gift given by the Spirit today is *not intended* for the same clarity, authority, or authentication as its NT namesake. But what would be the benefit of analog 'languages' that require decoding to compute the content? The Spirit attributes power to His written genius such that those who profit by it are "thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Carson seems to believe that the Spirit is dispensing tongues today which embed edifying messages in jumbled symbols, awaiting someone's decoding knack. Again, any clear-thinking continuationist should see the immediate problem with this idea. If the Holy Spirit intended to give His people a means of grace *beyond* the power and majesty of the Bible, are we really to believe that He chose cryptic gibberish over Scripture's piercing clarity for our growth in Christ? Why would the Spirit of God offer something so pitifully unclear and further muddying compared to the splendor of His written word? And if true, why have the Scripture's proved powerful and utterly sufficient to produce in generations of believers the kind of deep personal comforts today's coded 'tongues' claim to provide? The Spirit could hardly hold cessationists in contempt for preferring the sanctifying power of His written word over unintelligible alphabet soup.

### ***Smoke and Mirrors***

The continuationist camp also remains "open, but cautious" to the likelihood of individuals with miraculous healing gifts. While quick to dismiss the more outlandish faith-healing menagerie, the "open" crowd maintains that the Spirit still bestows healing gifts for the encouragement and edification of His people. The arguments, however, are no different than that of prophecy and tongues. Instead of the NT phenomena—instantaneous healing of organic disease by a word or touch—today's healers specialize in staged environments, 'healing' only a vetted group that claims various symptoms, illnesses and diseases. And unlike the NT gift, today's healings are repeatedly debunked and so-called cures left without medical verification. Countless self-styled healers and their claims have long proven to be outright chicanery. Yet, the unstaged NT gift drew multiple thousands of would-be critics who couldn't disprove a single healing. Even arch enemies of the Gospel didn't dare deny what their own eyes and scores of others people also witnessed—instantaneous restoration

to physical health of those with known organic diseases. Moreover, NT healings have stood the test of historical and literary scrutiny, again, without a single cure negated.

By comparison, today's healing gift is so patently inferior as to be unworthy of serious notice. That being the case, are we to believe that the Spirit, having displayed undeniable power through His inspired word, also intends believers to find grace and strength through contemporary second-rate phenomena? How could idiosyncratic, often counterfeit spectacles ever captivate our affections more than the magnificence and uncontested power of God's word? And since the NT gift of healing attested to the power of God beyond contradiction, what would be the Spirit's purpose today in doling out healing gifts which leave the church confused and devising excuses for the obvious lack of power? Can we be blamed for favoring cessationism in the face of modern wannabe-gifts?

Continuationists often counter that to deny healings today is to deny God's sovereign prerogative to heal. But no cessationist I know denies that God can and does miraculously heal when it suits His glorious purposes. The question is whether the Spirit bestows the gift of healing today. Continuationists can't seem to avoid the same nagging dilemma: the gift of healing allegedly offered by the Spirit today *simply does not parallel* the power displayed through the NT gift. They have no choice but to turn the discussion into one of whose view of the Spirit belittles God's power. But I would contend that with its sub-NT expression of the gifts, continuationism is the camp that conjures a smaller deity—a "spirit of lesser glory."<sup>[4]</sup> All He seems able or willing to deliver today—His best edifying works since the Apostles—are faulty hunches, cryptic speech, and dodgy cures. We're being asked by conservative charismatics to earnestly seek spiritual strength *not merely* through the power, certainty, and sufficiency of the Spirit's inspired Scripture. We're also supposed to pray for the Spirit's 'miraculous', yet categorically inferior gifts lest we miss out on the His most intimate ministry to His people.

But why would God's people be attracted to obscure encouragements from the Spirit when they have immediate access to His time-tested, "living and abiding word?" If given the option, wouldn't devoted, simple Christians always look for the clearest stream of truth rather than murkier waters? And why would God give miraculous but dubious experiences to build up His people when He's already given them "the mind of Christ" through His indwelling Spirit (1 Cor 2:16; Rom 8:11-13)? God declared His written revelation to be utterly sufficient for edification (2 Tim 3:16-17). Was He not aware of the dilemma this would present? Did God not know that spiritually needy Christians would inevitably shun His Spirit's 'lesser works' and hold fast to the Scriptures? How could God expect a different outcome? Are we to blame if we always prefer, every time, His Spirit's "living and active" word as an anchor for our souls rather than give even the slightest consideration to today's erratic, subjective offerings?

So it seems that in addition to sound exegetical arguments, the transforming supremacy of the Spirit's written word compels—indeed, indulges—my cessationism. By choosing to conform me into Christ's image through His written revelation, the Spirit has effectively up-staged all inferior privileges He allegedly continues to give. Today's maybe-prophecies, veiled speech, and staged recoveries are simply not a compelling comfort next to the Scriptures. For the record, I have lived my entire Christian life being sanctified, making decisions, raising a family, facing an evil culture, shepherding the flock of God, praying, seeing God work in my life, knowing His pleasure, smarting under His discipline, learning to be selfless, cultivating humility, being led by His Spirit, becoming more bold in evangelism, establishing doctrinal convictions, loving Jesus Christ and His cross beyond words, and experiencing the overwhelming wonder of worshiping my God—all *exclusively* through the instrument of the "living and abiding word of God" obeyed in faith! If God does reveal Himself "freshly" for our daily life by some other means than the Bible I sure haven't missed it. The Lord is as fresh to me now as ever! Does He strongly compel me to particular thoughts and actions? His word assures me that He does in several ways:

1. By means of the Spirit's control (as I yield to His written will – Eph. 5:18)

2. By conforming my fleshly reasoning to the mind of Christ (as I believe truth instead of lies – 1 Cor. 2:15; 2 Cor. 10:5)
3. By doctrinal convictions forged over time (as I grow in discernment – Heb. 5:14)
4. By the refining of my faith (as I entrust myself to Christ’s promises, providential care, and saving love – Rom. 8:26-30).

## **Just Exactly What Am I Missing? – Part 2**

### **How the Spirit’s Written Revelation Indulges My Cessationism**

#### **By Jerry Wragg**

#### ***Taking God at His Word***

Someone may ask: “What about those everyday practical ‘forks in the road’ where the dilemma of making a wrong decision seems to demand clearer insight into the future?” In every believer’s life, such cases are fairly routine and should be resolved in two ways:

1. Exhaust all means of wisdom commanded in scripture (e.g. seek wise counsel, apply biblical principles, confess and forsake motives and ideas that hinder sound judgment, and trust that the Spirit’s sovereign purposes). Having considered the above, move forward *in faith* (even when there’s more than one clear option, hence the faith!).
2. Trust that with practice, the Spirit builds discernment over time so that mature thinking becomes spiritual instinct, occurring imperceptibly. We needn’t pine away for specific divine direction when we’re already walking by faith and content in God’s care. No more answer is needed, nor do I believe one is offered by the Lord.

I have often wondered why so many Christians desire specific clarity from God in the practical issues of life. If an intimate walk with Christ guaranteed a set of daily, personal revelations to ensure that I always know the ‘best path’ in every circumstance, how would I ever learn simple faith (entrusting myself to God)? So far, God has strengthened my faith by His word alone *apart from such specific revelations*. If cessationists are missing such a crucial resource as fresh, divine revelation, you would think that glaring perversion, gross spiritual atrophy, serious doctrinal confusion, and frequent ruinous decisions would litter the cessationist-landscape (evidences all too common among many who *live by* revelations outside of scripture). Yet personally, in every persistent battle with the flesh (e.g. pride, weak faith, ignorance, laziness, unforgiveness, idolatry, and more) and my own daily struggle to humbly trust the Lord, I have found Scripture an utterly sufficient weapon against the enemy, the flesh, and the world. Continuationists affirm the sufficiency of Scripture as boldly, but not without *inconsistency*. Continuationism teaches that the rest of us have missed the personal work of the Spirit available to all believers, and therefore are merely trusting in ancient words alone. Logically, therefore, cessationist-churches must be “quenching the Spirit” by emphasizing the ancient scripture *over* contemporary revelations from God. I fail to see how continuationists can avoid this implication.

#### ***Voices and Impulses***

But how are we to understand those internal ‘promptings’ that stir our hearts and minds Godward? Are strong inner impressions (e.g. to witness to someone, to listen to a radio preacher, to be a missionary, to speak a word of encouragement) to be considered direct revelations from the

Lord? For the continuationist, the answer is 'yes,' primarily because there is no single passage of Scripture to the contrary (never mind that cessationism has yet to be refuted with so definitive a proof-text). A second reason they interpret various impulses as divine is that it provides needed specificity the Bible never intended to offer. I strongly disagree. The singular testimony of scripture regarding Christian maturity is that as our understanding of truth deepens through obedience, strong conviction and discernment increase exponentially (Heb. 5:14; 1 John 2:13-14). If we're inwardly (indeed, almost audibly) compelled at some moment to share Christ with someone, should we conclude that the Lord is directly revealing His future will? Isn't it possible (even more probable) that we're simply being directed by biblical convictions in concert with God's providential purposes at that moment? Could these strong impressions be the result of normal, godly thoughts brought on by a combination of biblical truth and Christian experience? Our minds work this way in every other arena of life, why must we suddenly divinize every strong notion and inner impression?

In fact, this is precisely how the conscience works. The scripture's teach that the conscience strongly condemns or affirms us, depending upon how we respond to the convictions we hold to be true (Rom. 2:14-15). Such condemnation and affirmation may be so inwardly compelling that it seems like audible screaming! Yet, no one would claim (I hope) that the promptings of the conscience *are direct revelations from God*. In fact, it is dangerous to give the conscience *ultimate* authority since it can be wrongly trained, sending false alarms where no sin exists, or no alarms when real guilt is present. Inner convictions operate in a similar fashion. The more biblically informed and mature our convictions, the stronger the 'impression' within us regarding a given circumstance. But if we mistake sensitive and mature spiritual convictions for "direct revelation" from God we will most assuredly 'hear' God's will where He has not spoken, and ignore His clear written word in pursuit of more than He offers.

Either we believe that *all* inner thoughts are directly given by God to complement His written revelation, or they are not directly from Him at all. And if not direct revelation, they can only be either the fruit of a Spirit-trained mind responding to the unfolding providence of God, or passing notions of no significance. Stated another way, strong inner-promptings and impressions are easily explained as God's providential leading in a spiritually seasoned believer whose biblical convictions 'speak to them' in the milieu of life. They *do not* require the belief that God has directly spoken beyond Scripture. His providence working through obedient believers is all that is needed (Phil. 2:12-13) to experience His leading. When Christians desire contemporary prophecies for the specifics of their life, they weaken their faith by longing for tangible affirmations rather than fully trusting the sufficiency of God's word. My own experience isn't the ground of what I believe, but it does continue to prove what God's word overwhelmingly claims, namely that it provides everything the Christian needs until glory.

### ***Unsolved Mysteries***

And what about testimonies of 3<sup>rd</sup> world missionaries "suddenly speaking in foreign languages" or "praying and touching the sick, and they were immediately healed," I offer the following caution: While it could be divine intervention, it could also be sinister. The question isn't whether God could do it (of course He could), but whether we're able to objectively know for certain that it is from God (a non-negotiable requirement for the NT sign gifts). That's the problem I have with these stories. They are most often recounted, not simply as anomalous works of God, but as "proof" that the NT gifts are still in operation, and that we should seek them.

Satan can—and I believe often does—use inexplicable events and their retelling as a way to distract true believers from the objective, written revelation of God. When we witness something phenomenal or hear such stories, we immediately begin to focus on investigating, verifying, and explaining them. We want to see "signs." We desire something tangible to our senses that doesn't demand raw "conviction of things not seen" (true faith). Some may claim that attempting to explain these

phenomena is from the sincere goal of “letting God be God,” and to avoid “quenching the Spirit.” Even if true, it doesn’t solve the problem. I may strongly desire never to “quench” the work of God, but since I can’t objectively verify that an event is from God, neither can I know for certain whether I’ve stifled or quenched His work. The point, in other words, is moot.

Every cessationist friend I know who’s experienced some strange set of circumstances they’ve not been able to explain is *immediately diverted* for a time from the disciplines of reading, studying, and trusting in God’s word. Some, sadly, never return to their once-robust faith in the written revelation of Christ or its sufficiency. Personal experiences, and our reflective musings about them, have always distracted God’s people away from objective truth in Scripture. And Satan loves it so, even if He has to use one of God’s atypical miraculous interventions somewhere on the planet to entice our love for “signs.”