

THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

One Spirit, Two Convictions

A respectful conversation about spiritual gifts

"Test everything; hold fast what is good."



GERARD FELLER

The Meeting

David and Ruben had been friends for almost twenty years. They belonged to different churches, but met every month to walk, talk, and pray for one another.

David was an elder in a Reformed congregation and described himself as a cessationist. Ruben was active in an evangelical-charismatic church and was a continuationist. Their friendship had never suffered because of their convictions, yet they had often avoided the subject of spiritual gifts.

One rainy evening they sat opposite each other in a small café. Outside, the wind rattled the windows.

“I heard that your church prayed for the sick last Sunday,” David began.

“We do that regularly,” Ruben replied. “But you ask as though there is another question behind it.”

David smiled. “Perhaps it is time we honestly discuss exactly where we differ.”

“Gladly. But let us begin by listening.”

Two Ways of Thinking

“You explain your position first,” Ruben suggested.

David took a sip of coffee.

“As a cessationist, I believe the Holy Spirit is fully at work in the church today. He convicts people of sin, brings them to faith, sanctifies them, gives wisdom, and helps them understand Scripture. I also believe that God answers prayer and can perform miracles.”

“So you do believe that God can heal someone today?”

“Certainly. God is free and almighty. Cessationism does not mean that God no longer acts supernaturally. I believe, however, that certain revelatory and sign gifts had a special purpose during the time of Christ and the apostles.”

“Which gifts do you mean?”

“Prophecy, tongues, and the ability to perform miracles and healings. In my understanding, these gifts confirmed the authority of the apostles and helped establish the first churches. Now that the apostolic foundation has been laid and Scripture has been given, those gifts no longer function in the same way.”

“So you are not saying that God can no longer heal,” Ruben concluded. “You are saying that no one today possesses the same healing ministry as the apostles.”

“Exactly.”

Cessationism at a glance

God still works today; the debate concerns particular gifts

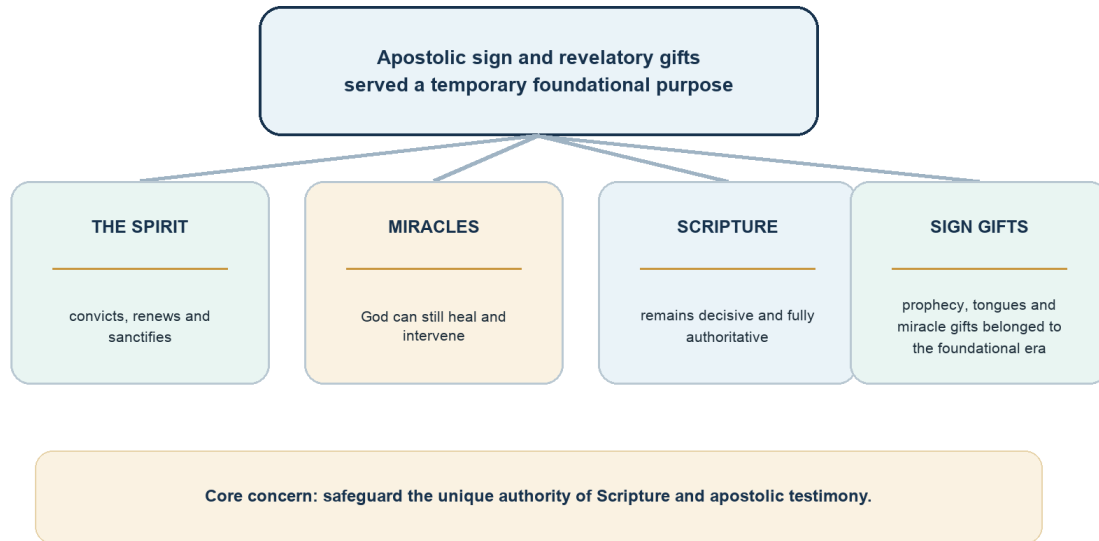


Figure 1 — The cessationist view summarised.

“Now it is your turn,” David said. “What does continuationism mean to you?”

Ruben paused before answering.

“I believe that, in principle, the gifts of the Holy Spirit remain available until Christ returns. Not every believer receives the same gift, and not every congregation experiences the gifts in the same way. But I do not find a clear statement in the New Testament saying that prophecy, tongues, and gifts of healing would disappear before the Second Coming.”

“Do you believe that someone can add new revelations to the Bible?”

“Absolutely not. Scripture is unique and authoritative. A present-day impression or prophetic message must never be placed on the same level as the Bible.”

“But if God truly speaks, should the message not be perfectly true?”

“That is one of the difficult questions,” Ruben admitted. “I believe God may place something on a person's heart, while that person can misunderstand or express it imperfectly. That is why someone should humbly say, ‘I think God may be drawing my attention to this,’ rather than, ‘God says that you must do this.’ Everything must be tested.”

“So a prophetic impression must never be used to control somebody?”

“Never. The moment someone uses God's name to dominate another person, it becomes spiritually dangerous.”

Continuationism at a glance

The gifts remain possible; every expression must be tested

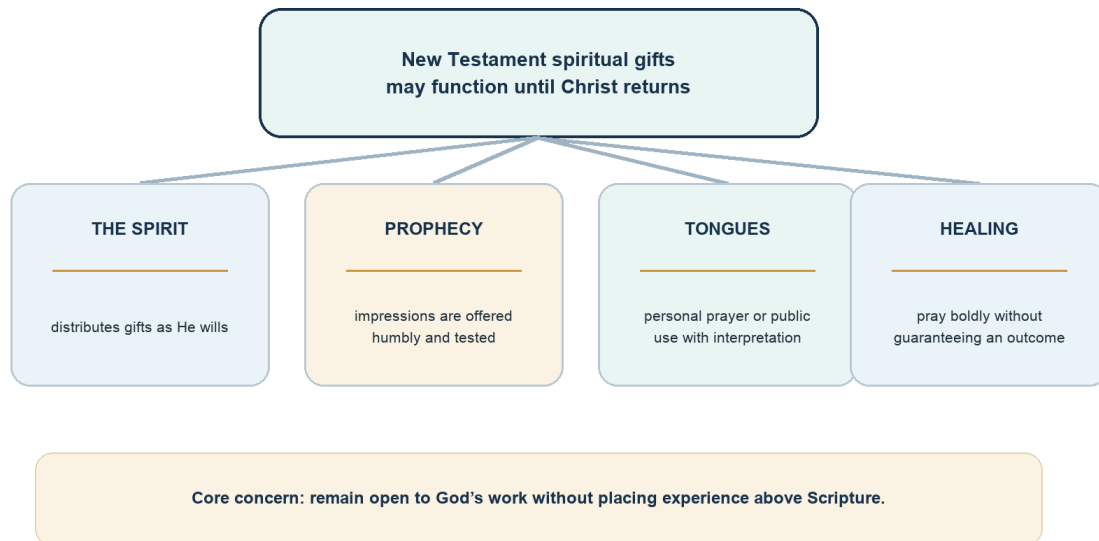


Figure 2 — The continuationist view summarised.

Questions about Prophecy

“May I question you critically?” David asked.

“That is why we are here.”

“Suppose someone claims to have received a message from God, and the message proves to be wrong. Was God mistaken?”

“No,” Ruben replied. “The mistake lies with the human being. The thought may have come from personal desire or fear, or a genuine impression may have been misunderstood. That is why Paul commands the church to test prophetic utterances.”

“But in the Old Testament a false prophet was judged very seriously.”

“That is true. Some continuationists therefore distinguish between the authoritative prophets who communicated divine revelation and prophetic utterances within a New Testament congregation. I know that you do not find that distinction convincing.”

“I do not. I fear it creates a category of words from God that may nevertheless contain errors.”

“I understand that concern,” Ruben said. “My concern is that every possibility of God's personal guidance might be rejected in advance. But I agree that the words ‘God told me’ have caused great harm.”

Ruben leaned forward.

“Now a question for you. Paul writes, ‘Do not quench the Spirit,’ and then says that prophecies should not be despised but tested. Why would that instruction no longer apply to us?”

“Because it was addressed to a church during the apostolic period,” David answered. “Just as certain other instructions were connected with the special circumstances of the earliest churches.”

“But where does the New Testament clearly teach that this period would end before Christ's return?”

“There is no single verse that says, ‘From this year onward the gifts will cease.’ My conviction arises from the whole picture: the unique position of the apostles, the completion of their testimony, and the foundational nature of their ministry.”

“Then both of us build our position from a collection of texts and theological conclusions.”

David nodded. “That is honestly true.”

Prayer for Healing

A waitress brought two fresh cups of coffee. After she left, Ruben looked at David.

“A woman in our church has cancer. We prayed for her and anointed her with oil. What would you do?”

“The same,” David answered.

Ruben looked surprised. “Really?”

“Of course. James calls us to pray for the sick. I would boldly ask God to heal her. But I would not promise that she will be healed, nor suggest that a lack of faith is preventing her recovery.”

“I completely agree. Charismatic circles have sometimes caused terrible harm by guaranteeing healing.”

“What do you say when healing does not come?”

“That God has not abandoned her. We continue praying, but we also offer practical help, companionship, and room for grief. Faith does not mean that someone must always appear cheerful.”

David was silent for a moment.

“My father died of a muscular disease,” he said. “A visitor told him he would recover if only he had enough faith. Afterwards my father felt not only ill, but also like a spiritual failure.”

“That should never have happened.”

“That experience explains some of my caution.”

Ruben placed a hand on his friend's arm.

“My caution has a different origin. In my former church we hardly ever asked specifically for healing. We mostly prayed for strength to endure illness. Sometimes it felt as though we had already decided that God would do nothing extraordinary.”

“Perhaps we must learn to pray without dictating God's answer,” David said.

“With expectation, yet also with surrender.”

“As Jesus prayed: ‘Not my will, but Yours be done.’”

Tongues and Order

“And speaking in tongues?” David asked. “What does that mean in your church?”

“Some use it as a personal prayer language. A public message in tongues may be given only if there is an interpretation. Otherwise the person should remain silent.”

“That sounds more orderly than I expected.”

Ruben laughed. “Did you imagine everyone shouting at once?”

“Not quite. But I have attended meetings in which nobody seemed to know what was happening.”

“So have I. Paul says that God is not a God of disorder. A spiritual experience does not automatically become trustworthy because it is impressive.”

“Do you think the tongues in Acts were existing human languages?”

“In that passage they clearly were. Whether every New Testament reference to tongues describes exactly the same phenomenon is debated. I leave room for a prayer language, but I know that interpretation is disputed.”

“I worry that believers who do not speak in tongues may feel like second-class Christians.”

“That would be unbiblical,” Ruben said firmly. “Paul asks rhetorically, ‘Do all speak in tongues?’ The answer is no. The Spirit distributes the gifts as He wills.”

Their Common Ground

David took a napkin and drew two overlapping circles.

“Look,” he said. “We keep talking about the part where we differ. Perhaps the overlapping part is much larger.”

Together they wrote down the convictions they shared.

One Spirit, a broad common foundation

The difference is real, but the shared ground of faith is substantial

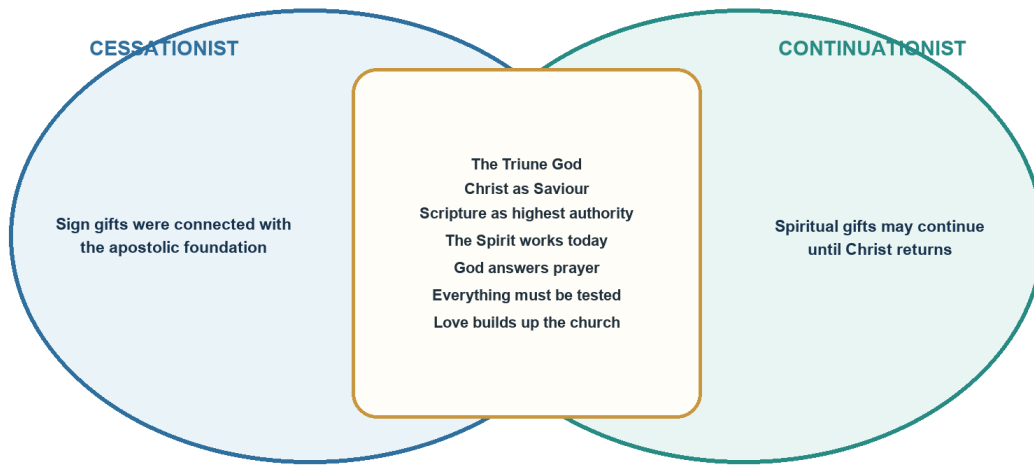


Figure 3 — Different conclusions within a broad common foundation of faith.

“We both confess that Jesus is Lord,” Ruben said.

“And that salvation comes by grace.”

“That the Holy Spirit is not a force we can manipulate.”

“That Scripture stands above our experiences.”

“And that experiences are not necessarily worthless.”

David smiled. “I need to think about that one a little longer, but yes.”

“We also both reject financial exploitation, fabricated healings, and prophecies used to control people.”

“And we both acknowledge that God is free,” David added. “He does not have to remain inside my theological system.”

“Or inside my expectations.”

An Unexpected Prayer

As they prepared to leave, the waitress approached their table hesitantly.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I heard you talking about prayer. My little boy is in hospital. Tomorrow we receive the results of an examination.”

David and Ruben looked at each other.

“May we pray for him and for you?” David asked.

The woman nodded.

Ruben prayed first.

“Lord, You know this child. We boldly ask You to heal him. Give the doctors wisdom and let the treatment be effective.”

Then David prayed.

“Father, carry this mother in her fear. Protect her child and surround this family with people who will truly help them. We place him in Your hands.”

When they finished, the woman wiped away her tears and thanked them.

Outside, the rain had stopped.

“We did not ask which church she belongs to,” Ruben observed.

“Nor whether she is a cessationist or a continuationist.”

“Do you think our prayer was prophetic enough?”

David looked at him.

“Do you think it was cessationist enough?”

They both began to laugh.

At the crossroads they said goodbye. Their theological difference had not disappeared. David was still a cessationist and Ruben was still a continuationist. Neither pretended that the difficult questions were simple.

But they had discovered that a conversation did not have to be won in order to be worthwhile. They could correct one another without condemning one another. David reminded Ruben of testing, order, and the unique authority of Scripture. Ruben reminded David of expectation, bold prayer, and openness to God's surprising work.

Together they wanted to guard against two dangers: accepting uncritically everything that appeared supernatural, and rejecting everything that did not fit their expectations.

Their shared principle remained:

“Test everything; hold fast what is good.”

Sources

Biblical Passages

Acts 2:1–21 — the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and speaking in other languages.

Romans 12:3–8 — different gifts of grace within one body.

1 Corinthians 12–14 — spiritual gifts, love, prophecy, tongues, and order in the church.

1 Corinthians 13:8–12 — the continuation and cessation of certain gifts.

2 Corinthians 12:7–10 — God's power in the midst of continuing weakness.

Ephesians 2:19–22 — apostles and prophets as the foundation of the church.

James 5:13–16 — prayer for the sick and anointing with oil.

1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 — not quenching the Spirit, not despising prophecies, and testing everything.

1 John 4:1 — not believing every spirit, but testing the spirits.

Theological Literature

Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* — a defence of a cessationist approach.

Thomas R. Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter* — a moderately cessationist discussion of spiritual gifts.

Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* — a continuationist interpretation of New Testament prophecy.

Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* — a defence of the continuation of spiritual gifts.

D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* — a careful exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14.

Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* — extensive research into historical and contemporary miracle accounts.