



Continuationism and Cessationism: An Interview with Dr. Wayne Grudem

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This is the second of two interviews I have conducted with leading theologians discussing the issues of cessationism and continuationism. You can read the first interview with Dr. Sam Waldron [here \(https://www.challies.com/?p=18034\)](https://www.challies.com/?p=18034). It will help you define terms and understand a cessationist perspective. Today's interview examines this issue from the continuationist perspective.

Dr. Wayne Grudem is Research Professor of Bible and Theology at Phoenix Seminary. He holds a B.A. from Harvard University, M.Div. from Westminster Theological Seminary and Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge. He has served as president of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, as president of the Evangelical Theological Society (1999), and as a member of the Translation Oversight Committee for the English Standard Version of the Bible. He has written more than 60 articles for both popular and academic journals, and his books include : *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, and *Business for the Glory of God*. He has also co-edited *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A response to Evangelical Feminism* and edited *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*.

I began our discussion by describing the purpose of this interview and the audience who was most likely to read it. I then proceed to ask questions of Dr. Grudem.

How important is this issue in the grand scope of all that's going on in the church today. How much attention do you feel this subject deserves?

That's a hard first question because there is no one answer that fits every church. I am in a church, Scottsdale Bible Church in Arizona, that has about 7,000 people in it. I suppose its position would be "open but cautious." Its heritage would be more from Dallas Seminary and Calvin Seminary and Bible Church background which has traditionally been more cessationist. In fact, in people's actual prayer lives as well as in the personal conversation of the pastor in the pulpit to the congregation, people talk about the Lord leading them and guiding them in specific ways. Sometimes in ways it sounds very much like the gift of prophecy to me, but they don't call it prophecy. They call it prompting or leading. I am thankful for all of that and I am very comfortable being in a home fellowship group where people pray and are willing to say how they think the Lord is leading them and guiding them as they pray and what He brings to their minds. And they don't call it prophecy. But I'm thinking, "That sure looks like prophecy to me!"

The pastoral leadership of the church might or might not say that there are people with the gift of healing today but in fact I am on the elder board and quite often at the beginning of an elder meeting we'll lay hands on someone and anoint someone with oil in prayer for healing according to James 5. God sometimes answers those prayers in wonderful, and I would say miraculous ways.

So what is very important is people's day-by-day walk with God and whether that is a vital, personal, ongoing relationship in which people, ordinary Christians, are regularly praying about concerns and events in their lives and getting answers to

prayers and knowing the reality of the Holy Spirit's guidance and direction. What's also important is people depending on the Lord in seeking His blessing and empowering in their ministries.

So how important is it? Some of the things that go on would be called by other names in more charismatic churches and they probably would be a bit more demonstrative. But the Holy Spirit can work in such a variety of ways.

Let me ask this. Do you feel that there is some inconsistency with cessationists in terms of what they believe and how they actually act out their faith? You gave the example of guidance. Many people I know claim to be cessationist yet still have no trouble claiming that "God told me" – they are using what Dr. Waldron called prophetic language.

I am thankful for that. However, Tim, I think we have to recognize that there is a segment of the cessationist community that is ready to pounce on anyone who speaks of subjective forms of guidance; ready to pounce on anyone who speaks of dealing with promptings of the Lord in one way or another; that is highly suspicious of any emotional component in worship or prayer. I don't know that that is representative of all of cessationism but there is a segment of the cessationist community that is so suspicious of any emotional component, any subjective component in all of our relationship with God and with others that it tends to quench a vital aspect of the personal relationship with God in the lives of ordinary believers. And that can tend to a dry orthodoxy in the next generation that abandons that faith and the church spiritually becomes dry and static, and I'm concerned about that.

Now, are you aware of this new book that came out last month called "Who's Afraid of the Holy Spirit?" Let me get that off the shelf.

I believe Justin Taylor sent me a link to it just a couple of days ago.

It's called *Who's Afraid of the Holy Spirit?* and it's by Dan Wallace who is a New Testament professor at Dallas Seminary.

And you wrote the foreword, right?

I did. I wrote the foreword and Josh McDowell wrote the foreword. It is an insider's look at dispensational cessationism and saying, "While we're still officially cessationist we can...become too rationalistic; give too high a priority on knowledge instead of relationship and this can produce in us a bibliolatry (believing in the Father, Son and the Holy Bible)." The net effect of this is the depersonalization of God and that part of the motivation for depersonalizing God is the increasing craving for control. We want to affirm that God is still a God of healing and miracles; Evangelical rationalism can lead to spiritual defection; many of the power brokers of Evangelicalism have been white, obsessive-compulsive males since the turn of the century; the Holy Spirit's guidance is still needed in discerning the will of God; we must not avoid the sufferings of Christ in seeking out the power of the Spirit; and then they talk about the witness of the Holy Spirit. I thought it was a very healthy book and I eagerly commend it. I didn't agree with everything in it but I thought that it was very good.

Back to "how important is it?" I would want to say to cessationists and to open but cautious people on the one hand that I agree that there are ways in which the Holy Spirit is still working that are similar to what was happening in the first century churches and described in the New Testament. I think that the first century church and the New Testament generally encourages us to seek miraculous workings of the Holy Spirit much more than we do in mainstream Evangelical churches. I think if we did, and if we taught about spiritual gifts that were consistent with Scripture and which put safeguards against abuses, that we would see a much greater explosion of the powerful working of the Holy Spirit in bringing more unbelievers to Christ and in bringing physical and emotional and relational healing to people within our churches and in bringing us to new levels of joy in worship beyond the

very positive things that we see today. I would like to see much more, not just openness to, but encouragement of the miraculous works of the Holy Spirit. That's what I've written some of the things that I have.

In general most Reformed people do not hold the position you do as a continuationist. Why do you feel that most Reformed believers are cessationists?

I am not sure that we know what most "Reformed believers" hold. I know what a number of professors at Reformed seminaries hold but that may not be representative of what is actually going on. I just want to say that as a qualification.

The dominant literature coming out of Reformed presses and Reformed seminary professors has been more cessationist I think. I think that's a fair characterization.

Would you be willing to suggest some reasons why that would be?

[Laughs] You want me to answer, really, don't you?

I suppose!

The most basic reason, and one which I think everyone can agree on, is a desire to protect the unique authority of the Bible and to protect the closed canon and not to have anything compete with Scripture in authority in our lives. That's a fundamental, deep concern among cessationists and I affirm that concern and I think it's very important to maintain it in the church.

I think it is somewhat of a historical aberration that cessationism – that the leaders of the Reformed movement have been cessationist. This was certainly not true in the seventeenth century among Puritans in England, for instance, like Richard Baxter. In *The Christian Directory* he has a number of statements that align almost exactly with my view of the gift of prophecy. And I quote those in the back of *The*

Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today. I took a couple of pages from Baxter's *The Christian Directory* and I faxed those to J.I. Packer and said, "It looks like Baxter holds the same view of prophecy that I do." Packer faxed me back and said, "Yes, you're right. This was the standard Puritan view. They weren't cessationists in the Gaffin sense." Let me just find that. Jim Packer gave me permission to quote that. I am quoting John Knox, the Scottish Reformer, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Samuel Rutherford, George Gillespie, Richard Baxter. I quote this on page 353 to 356 of *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. Packer, whose doctoral dissertation at Oxford was on Richard Baxter's works, sent back the following: "By the way, some weeks ago you faxed me an extract from Baxter about God making "personal, informative revelation" (those were Packer's words). This was the standard Puritan view as I observed it – they weren't cessationist in the Richard Gaffin sense." That's J.I. Packer's personal fax to me on September 9, 1997 and I quoted it by permission.

Packer knows the Puritans well. You also have this article in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* saying that the Westminster Assembly recognized different views of prophecy. Byron Curtis, who had this article in the Westminster Journal saying that the phrase "private spirit" in the *Westminster Confession* (110) means "private revelations of the Holy Spirit – personal revelations of the Holy Spirit" and it puts it in the same category as decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers and doctrines of men. These are all to be examined and attested by Scripture. So Curtis argues (there's been an answer to him in the *Westminster Journal*, but I don't think it's been an adequate one), and I think Curtis is right that the *Westminster Confession* itself allows for this and says it has to be subject to Scripture.

So I think we have in the twentieth century a historical aberration not essential to Reformed theology that cessationism has become the dominant view. It may be a legacy from B.B. Warfield and the respect with which people held Warfield. Warfield was responding to Roman Catholicism and their claims for the validity of their

doctrines based on appeals to miracles and Warfield was trying to discredit that. I don't know what Warfield would say about the modern charismatic movement but that isn't what was in his view at the time.

To be honest, Tim, the early beginnings of Pentecostalism in the United States in 1901 and 1906 at Topeka, Kansas and then at Azusa Street in Los Angeles, these were not theologically-sophisticated, highly-trained people leading the movement. They were more ordinary believers in whose minds the Holy Spirit began to work in a remarkable way but they didn't understand it very well at times and didn't articulate it very well. They began promoting a doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit after conversion that was a mistake and they mislabeled it – they should have called it filling or empowering of the Holy Spirit. I think much of it was a genuine work of the Holy Spirit. But it wasn't defended by people who knew Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German and French and had been to Princeton Seminary. And so it was so easy for people to focus on the abuses and mistakes and the misstatements or less than carefully articulated theological statements by the defenders of what was going on.

And honestly, I think that people who tend to gravitate towards a position of leadership in denominations that are highly doctrinally self-conscious tend to be people for whom doctrinal precision and analysis is of very high value. And their ministries naturally gravitate towards being very clergy-oriented and very oriented towards the ordained clergy and the means of grace – the administration of the sacraments, the preaching of the Word, discipline – these are all clergy-run means of grace. And so we are coming out of a heritage of the neglect of the importance of ordinary lay people ministering to one another in small groups and home fellowship groups and things like that – in prayer and personal words of counsel and encouragement and exhortation – that just wasn't a strong suit among many of our Reformed forbearers in the last century. And so when something comes along that has strong lay emphasis, an emphasis on lay ministry, and it wasn't anything

that was printed in the bulletin that was going to happen that week, it seems like things are not done decently and in good order. Then it begins to find reasons to criticize.

When you discuss these issues with cessationists, what do you feel is the single greatest misunderstanding of charismatics by cessationists? This is your opportunity to get that one thing off your chest.

I don't know that anything comes to mind. I have lived and worked and fellowshiped in so many contexts and have been able to be thankful for so many different contexts. To give you two examples, my son Elliot, was just six weeks ago ordained as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church of America in Raleigh, North Carolina, and I spoke at his ordination. A few months before that my son Alexander married a woman from an Assemblies of God background and I co-officiated the wedding with her father who is an Assemblies of God pastor. I felt very comfortable in both situations. To take another example, on the same week I received invitations (this is probably twelve years ago) to write notes on Second Corinthians for what was then called *The New Geneva Study Bible*, edited by R.C. Sproul, and to write notes on Romans for *The Spiritual Life Study Bible* edited by Jack Hayford which is a charismatic study Bible. I accepted both invitations and didn't tell either party that I was doing the other. They both come out within a short time of each other. I am just thankful for both ministries and for what they are doing for the work of the kingdom.

I would say that it is too easy to have in mind a mental picture of a caricatured episode that has been on television. If cessationists would actually attend some worship services or prayer meetings in more responsible Vineyard churches or Foursquare Churches or Assemblies of God churches or independent charismatic churches, I think they would be surprised how strong people's love for God is, and love for His Word, and desire to be subject to His Word, and not to teach or do anything that would be wrong, and how much real ministry and real healing in

people's lives (I don't mean just physical healing, but emotional and relational and spiritual healing) is going on and how much zeal for the lost, how much evangelism, how much care for the poor, how much actual carrying out the work of the kingdom is being done in these charismatic, Pentecostal and Third Wave churches. It's marvelous. It's wonderful and I think we need to be aware of the good examples of it of which there are tens of thousands and then be thankful for them.

This interview will conclude tomorrow. In the second part of the interview we discuss some specific cessationist objections to continuationist theology and Dr. Grudem explains why this discussion is valuable to the church.

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