



# Continuationism and Cessationism (Part 2): An Interview with Dr. Wayne Grudem

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*Let me turn to a couple of questions that I know are of concern to cessationists, that they routinely bring up as concerns about continuationist theology. The first of these is: if we grant the existence of non-authoritative prophecy, does not such a position weaken the argument for the sufficiency and authority of Scripture? In other words, does the existence of non-authoritative prophecy weaken our claims for the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture?*

I would restate that question by saying, if we say that God works through means other than Scripture, doesn't that weaken our authority for Scripture? I would answer, no, these are things other than Scripture. If, for instance, we say that God works through the advice of friends or the wise counsel of a pastor or elder, doesn't that weaken the authority of Scripture? It doesn't, because it is a different category of thing. It is something we think is used by God and through which God can work, and our strong belief in the Sovereignty of God would encourage us to think that, but it comes with human authority but not with absolute divine authority.

Whatever people would say about prophecy I would say, what about advice from friends and counsel from friends? How do you understand that? Same thing. Can't God work through that? Sure. Well, can't God work through prophecy? What's the

difference? I don't see that it is a qualitatively different thing. In fact I think the Westminster Confession of faith, chapter 1, paragraph 10, hints at the fact that we should put these in a similar category. So no, I don't think so.

Can there be mistakes that lay people make? Sure, but those aren't the responsible leaders that we should quote. I can quote from any movement mistakes of irresponsible lay persons.

*Probably the most common critique of continuationist theology by cessationists is that it relies too heavily on experience. Cessationists often claim that continuationists allow experience to drive their hermeneutic. How do you answer that?*

Doctrinal disputes should be settled by appeal to Scripture. Experience is not our final authority – Scripture is. But the Scripture talks about these spiritual gifts quite openly and honestly and frequently and talks about them in the context of the New Testament church and I think they're part of the church age.

*Is it possible to believe in a continuationist position without having experienced any of the gifts?*

I encounter students and pastors all the time who say "I'm not persuaded by the cessationist arguments from Scripture but I've never seen any of these miraculous things in my life." That is the most common comment that I hear about these things from people who are in mainstream Evangelical positions. And over the years as I've taught not only here at Phoenix Seminary but at other seminaries – adjunct at other seminaries – by far the most common view expressed among seminary graduates is open but cautious. They say "I'm not convinced by the cessationist arguments but I really don't know how to put these things into practice in my own church and I've never seen them happen." Tim, the cessationist

argument is not winning the day in terms of exegetical arguments or persuasiveness in the books published. I think it's appealing to a smaller and smaller group of people.

Are you aware of this book, *Miraculous Gifts for Today: Four Views* that I published from Zondervan?

*Yes, though I just received it a couple of days ago.*

A mature, widely-respected Evangelical leader in England, said to me about that book, that the thing most Evangelicals in England found surprising was that any argument could be made for cessationism at all. Another widely-respected British Evangelical leader fifteen years ago said to me that the battle between cessationists and non-cessationists in England is over. The cessationists have lost. Or the charismatics have won. I'm not sure exactly what he said but it was something like that. And that's the case, I think, in almost the entire world outside the United States.

*So you feel that it is a caricature that the cessationists have Scripture and the continuationists rely on experience.*

Yes. You know, Jack Deere in his book *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* – do you know this book, published by Zondervan?

*I know of it, though I haven't read it.*

His argument is that the primary reason why cessationists hold their view is experience. That is, he says, they haven't experienced any of these miraculous gifts and so they construct a theology to justify it. He was a highly-respected Hebrew and Old Testament professor at Dallas Seminary promoting a cessationist view.

*So he would say that the lack of experience is as much an argument from experience as actually having had the experience?*

Yes. I think that's an excellent book, actually. I agree with ninety-eight percent of it. He has some little thing about apostles that I don't agree with but otherwise I think it's an excellent book.

*One more question that a cessationist might have has to do with prophecy, as you might expect, and the fallibility of prophecy. If God grants prophecy today, why is it so frequently misunderstood? Continuationists will often explain that the details of prophecy do not work out perfectly perhaps due to human weakness or sin. Since God can make Himself clear, and usually did so in the Bible, why doesn't He do so today?*

He chose to work through imperfect means.

*And you'd say in Scripture He did not?*

Scripture is unique. He worked in a way that is inerrant and absolutely authoritative. But, throughout the whole history of the canon, from Adam and Eve to the book of Revelation you have a story of God interacting personally with individual people. The cessationist view wants to tell us that this doesn't happen anymore today, and I don't feel that's right. I should say, interacting personally with individual people in ways that are distinct from the canonical words of Scripture which they had at the time. It is God speaking to individual people. In spite of the fact that the Bible is full of those hundreds and hundreds of examples, now cessationists come along and say, "Sorry, God doesn't do that today. He did that throughout the whole history of the Bible but He doesn't do that today." That is relating directly to specific people other than through the written words of the canon that they had at that time.

*Do you believe that the way God spoke to people in Old Testament times, say, for example, the way God spoke to Abraham, is that consistent with the way God speaks to us today? How would God have spoken to Abraham?*

The way God speaks to people can vary widely in biblical times and it can today as well. Going back to “why does God speak to us in ways that are fallible,” I would say the same question can be asked of many other things. Why does God work through evangelists who are imperfect? Why does God work through pastors who work through imperfect sermons? Why does God work through Sunday school teachers who say things imperfectly? Why does God work through the advice of friends, some of whom make mistakes? God works in this age through imperfect people. That’s his normal manner of working. And to object to something by saying, “How can God work through this if it’s imperfect?” is just denying the entire way God works through people...

*I think the argument would be not that God works but that He speaks. The trouble people have is in an imperfect word of God.*

Doesn’t God speak through Sunday school teachers that are imperfect? Does He speak through personal counsel and advice that is imperfect? What’s the difference?

I really enjoy getting into this discussion when I get into it.

*I’m sure you do!*

I’ve been away from it. I’ve been into Bible translation and manhood and womanhood and I’m on rich and poor nations and I’ve forgotten about all this.

*Let me turn to the future to cessationist/continuationist relations. In the last few months I think we've seen some interesting developments between continuationists and cessationists. John MacArthur invited C.J. Mahaney to preach from his pulpit and there's also the Together for the Gospel conference that is coming up. Do you feel that these developments might just herald a new day for cessationist/continuationist relations?*

I hope so. I see these as outworking of the pastoral and church level the kinds of interaction and mutual appreciation that I've seen for the last twenty years in the academic world.

*Is it feasible or even desirable for cessationists and continuationists to come together to worship as members of the same church or denomination or is this too big an issue?*

Sure.

*No trouble with that?*

No. I pose an interesting hypothetical question at the end of this book, *Are Miraculous Gifts For Today: Four Views*. The very last segment of the book is my reflection on spending two days of conversations with the other four authors, Richard Gaffin, the cessationist, Robert Saucy, from Talbot, the open but cautious, Sam Storms being a Vineyard or Third Wave person, and Doug Oss from the Assemblies of God, and me. After everyone wrote their essays we met in a hotel conference room in Philadelphia for two days, no tape recorders, no notes, just the five of us talking for about seventeen hours. In my summary of it I talked about what had happened (and nobody changed his mind) but it was a wonderful discussion because all five of us had Ph.Ds in New Testament or theology and Doug Oss in his forties was the youngest in the room so we were fairly mature in our views. I said, "What if, by some strange act of God's providence, we were all thrown together in the same church and we were the five elders?" Here's how we would

have to make adjustments and allowances, but I think we could all work together. I love to pray with Richard Gaffin who is my cessationist friend because He walks with God. So I talk a little bit about that. [this references page 348 of the book]

I've been in a Vineyard church, I was about five years in a Vineyard church; I did a pastoral internship while I was at Westminster Seminary in an Orthodox Presbyterian Church – loved the people there and am thankful for the church; have been an elder of a Southern Baptist Church; now I'm at a Bible church. Wherever you go you find people, ordinary Christians, who love the Lord and they love His Word and if you can show things to them in the Bible they believe it and they try to follow it. I think that's a wonderful thing.

*On the subject of Southern Baptists, I wondered if you had any thoughts about the new policy adopted by their mission board. I don't know if you heard about that, but it forbids missionary candidates from speaking in tongues.*

I haven't read it so don't want to comment. If it's true I'd be very disappointed.

*Fair enough. Let's head towards wrapping this up. Why does God allow issues like this to exist in the church? You have to believe that He could easily clear up such issues as continuationism and cessationism. Why does He allow disputes like this to carry on?*

Well, for one He wants to test our hearts and see what our attitude is towards those with which we disagree. And two, He purifies the church through controversy because our positions are then deepened and strengthened. And so through the whole history of the church the controversies over the deity of Christ, over the Trinity, the great Reformation controversies over justification, the controversy in the church in our generation over inerrancy, controversy over men and women in the church, controversy over spiritual gifts – everybody changes. In recent controversy everyone has changed somewhat. But they come to a more nuanced, more refined, more accurate position and then they hold firm. That is happening in

the controversy over manhood and womanhood issues and we have more openness to and appreciation of the valuable ministries of women in the church, yet the church is not going to go in an egalitarian position. Ultimately, the vast majority of God's people are going to have churches where only men are elders.

*So you feel this is a valuable discussion and one that will end in a consensus of the church...*

What happens is over time the vast majority of God's people come to the right decision. Then, like the Arians in the fourth century, or like the anti-inerrantist people in our lifetime, the people on the other side eventually are marginalized and continue but with very little impact on the church as a whole. I think that is going to happen with egalitarians in the manhood/womanhood controversy, but it is going to take some time to get worked out because the culture has such strong pressure in the other direction. I think with regards to cessationists and non-cessationists the controversy has been very healthy in a number of ways: there has been a greater appreciation of the importance of spiritual gifts and ministry by every Christian to one another; there's been remarkable change in worship styles that I think has been very valuable and we have, in large measure, the charismatic movement to thank for that; there has been a great appreciation for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the empowering of the Holy Spirit and the validity of prayer and prayer for miracles today. On the other hand some of the abuses and mistakes of the charismatic/Pentecostal movement have been highlighted and people are trying to restrain those and refrain from making some mistakes like that. And there has been a new emphasis on the unique authority of the Bible and I'm thankful for that. So I think there's good on both sides.

*So you feel this controversy is going to end with others in the history of the church? That it will strengthen the church?*

Oh yes, definitely! It already has.



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