Two Views on the “Sign Gifts”:
Continuity vs. Discontinuity

Daniel B. Wallace
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Introduction
On any given day of the week, Christians can be found debating with one another over the “sign gifts”—that is, the spiritual gifts of tongues, prophecy, miracles, and healings. The debates center on a simple issue: Are they for today or not? There is no debate about whether these gifts were a part of the first-century Church. That part is assumed by all who embrace the Bible as the Word of God. Rather, the debate is whether these gifts have continued or have ceased. There is no debate that certain spiritual gifts have continued to today, such as teaching, mercy, administration, service, etc. But whether the more overtly supernatural gifts have continued is a different matter. The issue is not whether God is still powerful enough to work such miracles. Rather, the issue is whether he does so through individuals as special emissaries of his power. There is no debate over God’s power, or even miracles. All true Christians know that miracles happen every day: every time a person places his or her trust in Christ the greatest miracle occurs, because that person’s eternal destiny has just done a 180. The Spirit of God has broken through the shackles of sin and freed that person to see Jesus as he really is. That person is born again, receives a new nature, is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, and has begun a journey of progress toward becoming like Christ. What greater miracle is there than that? Further, Christians know that God still performs lesser miracles, such as miracles of healing, or any number of answered prayers. The issue of whether the sign gifts continue or not, then, has nothing to do with God’s power per se. But it has everything to do with the purpose of the sign gifts.

Continuity Vs. Discontinuity
This is more than fodder for an academic dialogue. To be sure, some theological issues are of that ilk. But not this one. If one Christian says that all tongues are of the devil and another says that you can’t be saved unless you speak in tongues, these two obviously will not have the richest fellowship. Each one will look at the other as still unregenerate. But even less extreme views can produce some distancing. If one person says that tongues is not of God (whatever its source), and another says that it is of God, then the first will view the second person’s spirituality as having some illegitimate elements to it, while the second will see the first as not letting God work in his or her life.

Many arguments could be used on each side of the debate. In this short paper, I wish simply to explore one issue: the argument from continuity vs. discontinuity. I write this knowing full well that many Christians will get angered at what I am saying. I plead with you to listen and dialogue. We can only grow if we are charitable toward one another and submit to the word of God as our final authority.

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1 The distinction here between God performing miracles and the continued existence of sign gifts has to do with the empowerment of the individual. Those who argue that the sign gifts have ceased do not argue that miracles have ceased. But they do argue that God is no longer granting individuals special powers to perform such miracles at will.
Those who argue that the sign gifts are for today generally hold to the argument from continuity. (They are called non-cessationists; within this group are charismatics and Pentecostals.) This argument essentially says that the sign gifts of the 21st century are simply the sign gifts of the first century, that they have continued from day one unabated until today. Part of the argument derives its theology from the book of Acts, part of it from the New Testament as a whole. The sign gifts are everywhere, it is claimed. This is normative Christianity. And to the extent that we today are not experiencing these gifts, to that extent we are not experiencing the richness of the Spirit and the spiritual life that God intends for us to have.

There are others who argue that, with reference to these gifts, there is greater discontinuity than continuity. (They are called cessationists or non-charismatics.) Part and parcel of this argument is the nature and purpose of these gifts. This view claims that these gifts were essentially poured out on select individuals for the purpose of authenticating that God was doing something new. Surely the coming of Christ and the doing away with the Law and the inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles into the spiritual community was radical stuff. When Jesus cleansed the temple and when he taught, his religious opponents wanted a sign. They knew that he was challenging the status quo. He had better back up his message with some miracles. So he gave them one big miracle: his own resurrection. End of discussion. Something new was afoot in Israel. God authenticated his message by raising him from the dead. Jesus invested supernatural authority in his own apostles (Matt 28.16-20) to bring this good news to the world. These apostles and certain others in the early church had a measure of some of these gifts. Whether they represent all Christians of all time or whether theirs was a special time and a special gift is the question.

I belong to the latter group. That is, I believe in a sufficient amount of discontinuity to warrant speaking of the sign gifts as having ceased. I will argue, in fact, that every true Christian has to belong to this latter category to some degree. I will offer two theses below, followed by several specific arguments backing them up.

**Thesis One: To the extent that we see discontinuity between the first century and the twenty-first in terms of the sign gifts, to that extent we are cessationists.**

**Thesis Two: The more we see discontinuity, the more we affirm that the purpose of the sign gifts was authentication rather than a display of normative Christianity.**

All Christians hold to some measure of discontinuity, just as all Christians hold to some measure of continuity. But that there is any discontinuity at all is most significant: It indicates the Spirit of God is not working in exactly the same way today as he was in the first century. If so, then we must immediately ask: How normative is the book of Acts? Indeed, how normative are the sign gifts?

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2 I am, however, a ‘soft cessationist.’ I believe that God does in fact empower certain individuals, on rare occasions and not at all as a normative experience, to exercise some of the sign gifts.
1. The Argument from the Close of the Canon

Only the radical fringe thinks that scripture is still being written. Virtually all cessationists and non-cessationists agree that scripture ceased to be produced with the death of the last apostle. With the death of John, the canon closed. What is the significance of this? Three things: (1) It is evident that the Spirit of God no longer is inspiring people to write scripture. Hence, there is a measure of discontinuity between the first century and the twenty-first. (2) Much of scripture is prophetic in nature. In the least, a certain kind of prophecy apparently ceased in the first century (the kind that was of universal value to the Church). So one cannot simply say that prophecy continues today just as it did in the first century. (3) Significantly, many folks say that the biblical argument for the cessation of the sign gifts is inadequate. Ironically, these same folks are adamant that scripture ceased in the first century. Yet the biblical arguments that the sign gifts have ceased are stronger than the arguments that the canon is closed. There is a certain inconsistency in their position. To be consistent, they should either affirm both the sufficiency of scripture and the cessation of the sign gifts, or the inadequacy and incompleteness of scripture and the continuation of the gifts. In fact, every time someone prophesies, they should have a discussion about whether such an utterance belongs in the Bible. That they don’t do this implicitly argues that they, too, are in some measure cessationists.

2. The Argument from Errant Prophecy

Some would counter the above by arguing that apostolic prophecy no longer takes place, but non-apostolic prophecy does continue. Further, they say, non-apostolic prophecy can have some errors in it, while apostolic prophecy is error-free. (This argument seems to be used because charismatics and Pentecostals regularly admit that their prophets are not perfect; their messages sometimes miss the mark.) The argument as sometimes presented is rather sophisticated and has some pretty decent scholars to back it up. However, it falters at three points: (1) This presupposes that non-apostolic prophecy in the NT was mixed with error, yet the passages used to prove this point don’t yield such an interpretation naturally. (2) There is a pragmatic problem with the possibility that modern-day prophecies can be mixed with error. When a so-called prophet says, “Thus says the Lord,” the recipient of such a message ought to be able to bank on it. But there may be error in the message. How much is allowable? Perhaps the message is something like, “John, you need to quit your job and apply to General Motors.” What if the prophet got it garbled from the Lord and the message was supposed to be, “John, you need to quit jogging around the General Motors plant?” or “John, you need to quit your job and apply to General Mills”? Obviously, errant prophecy gives the recipient little confidence and may, in fact, have disastrous results. (3) This point involves a key text. The argument is a bit difficult to follow, but important to think through. The key passage is Ephesians 2.20. There Paul says that the Church is built on the foundation “of the apostles and prophets.” The Greek construction is such that it almost surely views two distinct groups (apostles, non-apostolic prophetic leaders).

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3 To be sure, there are some groups that claim to have their own prophets who have written inspired books. But such groups are always otherwise heretical. And they usually center around one strong personality who has brain-washed them into thinking that they have the truth with a capital T. We usually call them cults.
prophets) or two overlapping groups (probably “apostles and other prophets”). If either of these is correct, then the Church is built, in part, on non-apostolic prophets. And if that is the case, then non-cessationists have a problem: Either the foundational prophets of the Church mixed error with truth (in which case, the New Testament itself is error-prone and is no longer our final authority) or else non-apostolic prophets were, like the apostles, without error in their prophecies. If the former is affirmed, then the Bible is abandoned as the final authority; if the latter is affirmed, then modern-day prophets do not have continuity with the first-century prophets. In short, if one embraces the Bible as authoritative, then one rejects modern-day prophets. Such prophets have no continuity with the first century.

3. The Argument from Faith-Healers
Several years ago, I was at a conference on pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit). At the conference cessationists and non-cessationists were discussing their differences, in the midst of a broad confession of unity. There, some faculty members at a major Christian university stated that their founder never claimed to be a faith-healer. Yet, he had gone on thousands of crusades throughout the world, allegedly healing people in the name of Jesus. I asked for a clarification. They said that he had the gift of faith and that they knew of no one who had the gift of faith-healing today. By saying that he had the gift of faith, they admitted that when he prayed for someone that person did not always get healed. I believe that the gift of faith still exists today. It is not one of the sign gifts. What was curious in this discussion, however, was that these professors at a Pentecostal university knew of no one today with the bona fide gift of faith-healing. (Sure, they knew about several folks who claimed to have the gift. But they were as skeptical about these folks as most of the rest of us are.) Hence, they inadvertently agreed with cessationists that what was going on in the first century is not the same as is going on in the twenty-first. In other words, by their own admission, they embraced discontinuity when it came to the sign gifts.

4. Miscellaneous Arguments for Discontinuity
There are several other arguments on the side of discontinuity. Some of these will take time to develop, but at least they should be put out on the table for discussion. First, where are the miracle-workers today? The gift of miracles (i.e., miracles that were other than healings) existed in the first century. But where are the miracle-workers today? Second, in the early church the gift of discernment was heavily employed. Today, although there are pockets of discernment here and there, by and large the charismatic movement caters to gullibility—so much so that one is often scorned and viewed as unspiritual if he raises questions about legitimacy or proper use of a particular supernatural manifestation. Third, many non-cessationists claim that the biblical basis for the sign gifts as a normal manifestation of the Spirit is to be found in Mark 16.9—20, especially verses 17–18. We will address in some detail this passage in a later essay, but

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4 The construction in Greek is a plural personal article-noun-kai-noun construction. In the singular such a construction follows “Granville Sharp’s rule.” And Sharp’s rule indicates that both nouns would refer to the same person. But nouns in the plural do not fit Sharp’s rule. For example, “the men and women” in Acts 17.2 or “the Pharisees and Sadducees” in Matt 3.7 are plural personal constructions. Yet, it is obvious that men are not the same as women and Pharisees are not the same as Sadducees.
suffice it to say here that the text is most likely not a part of Mark’s gospel. The earliest manuscripts do not have these verses and the earliest patristic writers indicate extreme doubt about their authenticity. The vast majority of New Testament scholars today (including non-cessationist scholars) believe that these verses were added by a later hand. And even if these verses are part of Mark’s Gospel, it is probable that they speak of the sign gifts as authenticating signs, not normative manifestations.

**Conclusion**

Continuity or discontinuity? In several major ways, there is discontinuity between the first century and the twenty-first century as far as the sign gifts are concerned. This certainly raises questions about the legitimacy of such gifts today. We have not even addressed the historical evidence that after the first century those who have practiced the sign gifts have almost always been on the fringes of orthodoxy. From the second century until the beginning of the twentieth, such manifestations were almost unheard of in orthodox circles—yet God somehow was able to bring about great revivals (not to mention the Reformation!) without such gifts taking center stage. How is that possible if they are normative expressions of the Christian faith?

Having said all this, a word of counsel must be added. Some readers will surely read into this piece an angry tone or a statement that their entire spiritual experience is illegitimate. Neither could be further from the truth. My concern for believers is borne of pastoral motives; it does not come from a vendetta. I am deeply concerned about postmodernism’s impact on the Church with its elevation of personal experience as the final authority for life. At the same time, I believe in the bigness of God. He is sovereign over all the affairs of life. None of us has it all together. No one has a corner on the truth. I think that charismatics do a lot that is right and cessationists do a lot that is wrong. We can learn from each other. I have already addressed this in brief. But suffice it for now to say that if someone has embraced Jesus Christ as his or her Savior, then that person is in the universal body of Christ. And that means that we have much more in common than not.

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