SURELY, one might think, the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention and the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy safeguarded the man in the pew from the conclusions of higher criticism. Although conservative Christians have taken a valiant stand against liberalism, they have endorsed a form of supernatural skepticism out of seeming necessity. Charles Kraft explains how the corrosive ethos diminishes one’s ability to mount a reasonable defense of the Bible when facing its critics:

Instead of attempting to return to at least the more reasonable aspects of the supernaturalism that the Enlightenment overturned, evangelicals have often argued against the liberal positions from the same rationalistic basis. We, like they, have often seen little of God’s hand in the present and conducted our defense purely on the basis of what God used to do.

Kraft is pointing out how a large part of Western evangelicalism doesn’t believe the Holy Spirit is actively revealing Himself, as reported in the New Testament, through speaking in tongues, healing by the laying on of hands, and prophetic utterances. Although these gifts are described as ongoing, unbelief has been baptized as cessation theology—the threefold idea that
1) the Holy Spirit’s purpose for the “sign gifts” was finished in the first century;
2) the sign gifts were given exclusively to the original twelve apostles, so that the sign gifts and apostleship are inextricably linked; and 3) the gift of apostleship no longer exists. The most-often cited proof text is: “Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part” (1 Corinthians 13: 8–9). According to cessationists, “the perfect” refers to the New Testament implying that, upon the closing of the canon, the sign gifts cease. However, this is a far-fetched twisting of Scripture, as “the perfect” more likely denotes the return of Christ.

John Piper explains:

Let’s take the two halves of the verse one at a time. First it says, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.” Is it more likely that Paul is saying, “Now before the New Testament is written, we see in a mirror dimly; but then when the New Testament is written, we shall see face to face”? Or is it more likely that he is saying, “Now in this age we see in a mirror dimly; but then when the Lord returns, we shall see face to face”? In the Old Testament there are half a dozen references to seeing God “face to face.” Revelation 22: 4 says that in heaven we shall see God’s face. 1 John 3: 2 says that when Jesus appears, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.

The cessationist interpretation makes little sense in context. Even so, from this dubious foundation, cessationists argue that: 1) the sign gifts have ceased, and 2) they should not be expected to return. Although sincere believers hold this view, it is easily refuted by Scripture and a survey of church history.
The first point ignores the purpose of the power described in Luke 24: 49: “Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high,” and Acts 1: 8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (underline added). The power is to aid the completion of global evangelization. The task of world evangelization is not yet complete. The power is for authenticating the gospel—the resurrection of Jesus—not the apostles. The disputed long ending of Mark, while likely not original, still preserves the opinion of the early church, and it states: “And these signs will accompany those who believe” (Mark 16: 17a, underline added).

In Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, he added the words “in the last days” to Joel 2: 28–32. The last days he spoke of are not just the end times, but were inaugurated at Pentecost (1 Corinthians 10: 11; 2 Timothy 3: 1; Hebrews 1: 2; James 5: 3; 2 Peter 3: 3) and will continue until Christ’s return. Peter included gifts like prophecy, dreams, and visions, which most cessationists deny: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2: 17). Also, Paul wrote to the Corinthian church: “so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1: 7, underline added), implying that all of the gifts are for the entire period up until Jesus’ return. Thus, point one must be false, because there is no scriptural reason to suspect the sign gifts have ceased and many to the contrary.

As to the second point that the sign gifts were only for the original twelve apostles, there is not even a hint of that in the Bible. The same sign gifts were displayed by Stephen (Acts 6: 8) and Philip (Acts 8: 13), who were not of the original twelve. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul gives detailed instructions about the use of tongues. Though he warns sharply against many abuses of tongues, he doesn’t outlaw their use. Instead, he explicitly says, “Do not forbid to speak with tongues” (v. 39b). He teaches that they are a sign for unbelievers and that prophecy is a sign for believers: “Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers” (1 Corinthians 14: 22, underline added). Obviously, Paul did not teach cessationism but rather the continuation of the sign gifts.

From there, we see a steady stream into the second century. Justin Martyr wrote in an apologetic to a Jew named Trypho, stating: “For the prophetical gifts remain with us, even to the present time. And hence you ought to understand that [the gifts] formerly among your nation have been transferred to us.”[130] In addition, the charismata bestowed upon the apostolic church were not extinct in the days of Irenaeus (second century, AD 202). He was a student of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John.

He wrote in his Against Heresies:

Wherefore, also, those who are in truth His disciples, receiving grace from Him, do in His name perform [miracles], so as to promote the welfare of other men, according to the gift which each one has received from Him. For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ], and join themselves to the Church. Others have foreknowledge of things to come: they see visions, and utter prophetic expressions. Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for many years. (underline added) [131]

Irenaeus even offered his own personal recollection of some who had been raised from the dead living on as witnesses to the Christian faith. Furthermore, he mentioned that tongues were an ongoing sign gift in the second century:

In like manner we do also hear many brethren in the Church, who possess prophetic gifts, and who through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages, and bring to light for the general benefit the hidden things of men, and declare the mysteries of God, whom also the apostle terms “spiritual,” they being spiritual because they partake of the Spirit, and not because their flesh has been stripped off and taken away, and because they have become purely spiritual. [132]
Even Augustine (AD 354–430), initially a cessationist, later changed his mind because of all of the supernatural miracles he witnessed. He mentioned a blind man restored to sight: “The miracle which was wrought at Milan when I was there, and by which a blind man was restored to sight, could come to the knowledge of many.”[133] A woman with terminal breast cancer got baptized and was subsequently ruled to be miraculously healed by a physician: “When he had examined her after this, and found that she who, on his former examination, was afflicted with that disease was perfectly cured.”[134] He lists miraculous healing after healing and astonishing accounts of demonic possession, like this one:

There is a country-seat called Victoriana, less than thirty miles from Hipporegius. At it there is a monument to the Milanese martyrs, Protasius and Gervasius. Thither a young man was carried, who, when he was watering his horse one summer day at noon in a pool of a river, had been taken possession of by a devil. As he lay at the monument, near death, or even quite like a dead person, the lady of the manor, with her maids and religious attendants, entered the place for evening prayer and praise, as her custom was, and they began to sing hymns. At this sound the young man, as if electrified, was thoroughly aroused, and with frightful screaming seized the altar, and held it as if he did not dare or were not able to let it go, and as if he were fixed or tied to it; and the devil in him, with loud lamentation, besought that he might be spared, and confessed where and when and how he took possession of the youth. At last, declaring that he would go out of him, he named one by one the parts of his body which he threatened to mutilate as he went out and with these words he departed from the man. But his eye, falling out on his cheek, hung by a slender vein as by a root, and the whole of the pupil which had been black became white. When this was witnessed by those present (others too had now gathered to his cries, and had all joined in prayer for him), although they were delighted that he had recovered his sanity of mind, yet, on the other hand, they were grieved about his eye, and said he should seek medical advice. But his sister’s husband, who had brought him there, said, “God, who has banished the devil, is able to restore his eye at the prayers of His saints.” Therewith he replaced the eye that was fallen out and hanging, and bound it in its place with his handkerchief as well as he could, and advised him not to loose the bandage for seven days. When he did so, he found it quite healthy. Others also were cured there, but of them it were tedious to speak.[135]

Even more amazing, Augustine reported that the dead were still being raised:

There, too, the son of a man, Irenaeus, one of our tax-gatherers, took ill and died. And while his body was lying lifeless, and the last rites were being prepared, amidst the weeping and mourning of all, one of the friends who were consoling the father suggested that the body should be anointed with the oil of the same martyr. It was done, and he revived. [136]

Augustine lamented there were so many divine miracles performed he could not record them all:

What am I to do? I am so pressed by the promise of finishing this work, that I cannot record all the miracles I know.... For when I saw, in our own times, frequent signs of the presence of divine powers similar to those which had been given of old, I desired that narratives might be written, judging that the multitude should not remain ignorant of these things. (underline added)[137]

Augustine called these “signs,” similar to those of old, which were occurring frequently in fourth and fifth centuries—long after the apostles had lived. While allowing the third point in the cessationists’ syllogism that true apostleship entailed being an eyewitness to the resurrected Lord, this testimony from the early church fathers soundly discredits the second pillar of the cessationists’ argument. With the first two premises proven false beyond a reasonable doubt, the argument for cessationism fails.

Cessationism is a product of the Enlightenment ethos. Frankly, it amounts to a sanctified form of unbelief. Certainly, cessationists argue that their unbelief is justified by abusive charlatans, and there are many. Nevertheless, phonies more properly warrant increased discernment rather than sweeping dismissal. Of course, we should not accept every supernatural claim, but it seems fair to point out that we run the danger of creating a self-fulfilling theology because even Jesus would not work miracles when faced with stubborn unbelief: “And he did not do many mighty
works there, because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13: 58). There are voluminous reports by missionaries from South America, Asia, India, and Africa that support the tongues phenomenon still serves as a sign to unbelievers. As a trained physicist-turned-Anglican clergyman, John Polkinghorne, points out, “It might be that other cultures provide, through their different practice and different kinds of openness, regimes more conducive than ours to certain types of experience.”

It seems that where belief flourishes, miracles still occur — even in the West.

New Testament scholar Craig Keener has documented thousands of cases in his massive, two-volume set: Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts. Against David Hume-inspired skepticism, Keener lists two theses for the book. The primary thesis is that eyewitnesses still do make miracle claims like those in the New Testament, and the secondary thesis is that supernatural explanations should be welcome on the scholarly table along with other explanations, rather than being perfunctorily excluded. The case for point one is so overwhelming that no intellectually honest reader can leave Keener’s work unconvinced. The second point is more controversial: “That we are not obligated to begin with the a priori assumption that none of these events could involve intelligent supra-human causation.” Even so, it does not entail naïve acceptance, but rather fair-mindedly following the evidence where it leads.

As one example among thousands of modern-day reports of miraculous healings, the case of Kayla Knight stands out for its corroborating scientific evidence. In 2008, Kayla, an eleven-year-old girl, had a massive brain tumor that covered nearly a fourth of her brain. A local news station reported Kayla’s mother, Amy, saying:

We both hit our knees and we were praying. That was actually on a Wednesday so when we got to church we had a good 30 people or more lay hands on her and it just... you could feel God. I can’t say we prayed as much before. I mean we did... but not like this. Not like we do now.

Two days after the prayer and laying on of hands by the church, Kayla was sent to Baylor Hospital in Dallas for emergency surgery to save her life. In preparation to remove the tumor, the doctors took another MRI and were astounded.

Tumor seen on left is completely missing on right two days later. The tumor was completely gone. Amy described the doctor’s confusion:

He said, “It’s got to be a mistake, it has to be. We are going to schedule another test, there is no way it’s just gone,” and just the whole time he is stuttering and there is just this look on his face like: I don’t understand. I don’t know. We did another one and it was gone and his words were, “It was truly a miracle, this has to be the act of God.”

This case validates the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible. While cessationists pray for healing, how many would have the courage to allow thirty folks to lay on hands when faced with such an illness? Of all the supernatural sign gifts, prophecy is the most important.

The most ironic thing about the gift of prophecy is that many ostensibly cessationist pastors are exercising it without knowing it. Charles H. Spurgeon, a seminal figure in the Reformed Baptist tradition, was known as the “prince of preachers.” It is estimated that in his...
heard that I had become a thief.” [144] Spurgeon wrote, “I could tell as many as a dozen similar cases in which I pointed at somebody in the hall without having the slightest knowledge of the person, or any idea that what I said was right, except that I believed I was moved by the Spirit to say it.” [145] Something similar led to my own conversion. When I first attended Providence Baptist Church in my hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina, I went only to appease my mother. I was at the end of my rope, having pursued a “rock-star” lifestyle to the point of demoralizing addiction to drugs and alcohol. I had tried treatment centers and twelve-step programs, only to fail repeatedly. Church was the last stop on the block, and I had no expectation that it would help. As I sat in the pew, Pastor David Horner seemed to read my mind. At one point, he exclaimed, “Maybe someone out there has been telling God that you are going to commit suicide because your life is no longer worth living. God says He can make you a new creation. Do you think you know better than God?” It wasn’t just a general statement that coincidently matched my disheartened state; I was thinking that exact thought precisely when he said it. I believe God spoke directly to me through him. Paul wrote about this phenomenon: “But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (1 Corinthians 14: 24–25). Even though Pastor Horner didn’t know it at the time, it was a true sign miracle that led me to the gospel. Things began to change rapidly after that, and today I am a seminary-trained Christian author. (My testimony is available online by following the link in the endnote [146]) Sign miracles do still happen today, but Western Christianity suffers from a lack of belief that is perpetuated by Satan’s clever use of counterfeit.

It is logical that Satan would direct his attacks to the sector of Christendom that threatens him most. If so, charismatic Christianity is his greatest fear. Thus, he seeks to discredit it by promoting phonies. Most cessationism is a reaction to widespread abuses seen on the fringes of the Charismatic movement. Ironically, it is based on contemporary experience rather than biblical exegesis. While false teaching deserves rebuke, all too often the baby is thrown out with the filthy bathwater. Satan seeks to disempower the church so that he may control the middle realm. By inciting disgust with the false prophets, he promotes cessationism. However, counterfeit always assumes the genuine. No criminal in his right mind would print three-dollar bills. Satan is not stupid. Accordingly, false signs and wonders closely parallel the genuine article in order to discredit it.

Many mature, believing scholars support the responsible use of tongues and other sign gifts. John Piper, J. P. Moreland, Sam Storms, Adrian Warnock, Gordon Fee, Wayne Grudem, and Michael Brown being high-profile examples. Moreland notes that, “Fewer and fewer Christian scholars hold to cessationism, and it may fairly be called an increasingly marginalized viewpoint.”[ 147] He admits that growing consensus does not prove cessationism false, but adds, “At the very least, the direction of Evangelical thought on these matters should cause cessationists to lower the degree of strength they take themselves to have regarding the truth of their position.”[148] Unfortunately, rather than the humility Moreland suggested, an overconfident enmity is being promoted by John MacArthur as this book goes to press.[149] For someone who claims a Supernatural Worldview, he promotes a very strange fire of hostility toward charismatics. Might he unwittingly be playing into Satan’s hands? As the return of Christ grows closer, there very well may be an increase in bona fide prophetic words in the fashion of prophets of old. Hard-line cessationists will unwittingly close themselves off. Even so, alleged prophets, however, should still be tested (1 Thessalonians 5: 20–21), and the test is the same now as it’s always been (Deuteronomy 18: 22). This begs the question, “Will the cessationist church have ears to hear?” It has excluded the middle through a corrosive ethos to be explained below] ...

FOOTNOTES:


[132] Ibid., 531.


[134] Ibid., 486.

[135] Ibid., 487.
[136] Ibid., 489.
[137] Ibid.
[142] Yeats.
[144] Ibid.
[(148) Ibid., 176.]