

Signs and Wonders in the Old Testament An Old Testament Response to “Third Wave” Theology

Joel T. Williamson, Jr.
Professor of Old Testament
Calvary Theological Seminary

Sixth Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics
Clark Summit, PA, September 18–19, 2013
Revised, November 2013

In 1988, C. Peter Wagner coined the term “third wave” to describe the last of three successive manifestations, or “waves,” of miraculous activity by the Holy Spirit that he identified in the twentieth century.¹ The first of these waves was the Pentecostal Movement at the start of the century; the second was the Charismatic Movement of the 1960's; and the third began with the ministry of John Wimber and the Vineyard Church in the 1980's. Though sharing the basic perspective of its predecessors, the third wave also differs from them in several ways. Three are worthy of notice. First, both Pentecostals and charismatics treat the baptism of the Holy Spirit as an experience subsequent to salvation, but proponents of the third wave understand it as a synonym for the indwelling of the Spirit, an unexperienced event simultaneous with salvation.² Second, the first two waves emphasize speaking in tongues, but the third wave focuses on healing and prophecy.³ Finally, those in the first two waves unabashedly approach Scripture based on their own experience of the miraculous.⁴ While

¹C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit: Encountering the Power of Signs and Wonders Today* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1988).

²So C. Samuel Storms, “A Third Wave View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 176. Wimber himself teaches that “conversion and Holy Spirit-baptism are simultaneous experiences” (*Power Points* [San Francisco: Harper, 1991], 136).

³David Oldham, “The Gift of Prophecy and Modern Revivals,” *Reformation and Revival* 5, no. 1 (1996): 111, n. 1.

⁴Gordon Fee, himself a Pentecostal, acknowledges that Pentecostals are noted for their weak hermeneutics: “In general the Pentecostals’ experience has preceded their hermeneutics” (Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991], 86).

not ignoring experience, those in the third wave claim to defend continuationism (i.e., noncessationism)⁵ using Scripture alone.⁶ They even appeal to the Old Testament.

The nature and function of spiritual gifts are clearly New Testament issues, and much of the cessationist-continuationist debate centers on only a few New Testament passages (most notably 1 Corinthians 12–14). Still, proponents of the third wave make at least two statements about the Old Testament that warrant a response. First, they argue that “miracles, signs, and wonders occur consistently throughout the Old Testament”; therefore, the church should expect to see them even today.⁷ According to this line of thinking, continuation is the biblical norm, and the burden of (dis)proof rests on the cessationist. Second, continuationists argue that the miracles of the New Testament, especially prophecies, are qualitatively different from those of the Old. Unlike prophecy in the Old Testament, “prophecy in ordinary New Testament churches was not equal to scripture in authority, but was simply a very human—sometimes partially mistaken—report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone’s mind.”⁸ If this is true, Old Testament teaching and examples have no impact on the understanding of prophecy (and presumably other miraculous activities) in the New Testament. In short, modern continuationists appeal to the Old Testament when defending the

⁵The terms “continuationism” and “noncessationism” both refer to the belief that the miraculous gifts still function today. Both terms are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

⁶The hermeneutics of the third wave is not above criticism, but that topic is beyond the scope of this paper. For an overview and critique of the approach, see Robert L. Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Noncessationism.” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 287-310.

⁷C. Samuel Storms, *Tough Topics: Biblical Answers to 25 Challenging Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 238.

⁸Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, 2d ed. (Westchester: Crossway, 2000), 14.

continuation of sign gifts, but reject it when explaining their nature. As this paper attempts to show, they are wrong on both counts—and their error makes a meaningful difference.

Issue One. The Continuation of Old Testament Signs and Wonders

One claim often made by continuationists is that the existence of miraculous works or gifts in the past shifts the burden of proof to the cessationist. Unless Scripture specifically teaches that signs and wonders have ceased, the church must assume that they continue. Thus, in his latest defense of continuation, Storms makes the following claim:

Miracles, signs, and wonders occur consistently throughout the Old Testament (as Deere demonstrates in his extensive survey of the Old Testament⁹; see especially Jer. 32:20, as well as the miraculous and supernatural activity during the Babylonian captivity as recorded in the book of Daniel). Prophecy in particular was prevalent throughout most of the Old Testament, being absent or comparatively less active only because of the idolatry of Israel.¹⁰

As Storms puts it elsewhere, “We must also not forget that there are no cessationists in the Old Testament! . . . Miracles, signs, and wonders occur consistently throughout the Old Testament.”¹¹

According to this way of thinking, even if cessationists are right and “New and Old Testament

⁹Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 255-61. MacLeod takes special issue with Deere’s evidence: “He fails to distinguish between miracles and healing and the gifts of miracles and healing. Cessationists do not deny that God is a miracle-working God. What they do deny is that there are Christians today who have the gifts of healing and miracles. That is why Deere’s chart (pp. 255–61) at the end of the book is completely misleading and irrelevant. Cessationists agree that God has performed miraculous deeds . . . throughout biblical history. What they also assert, however, is that miracle-performing men have only appeared at a few significant periods in that history” (David J. MacLeod, “Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: A Review Article.” *Emmaus Journal* 10, no. 1 [Summer 2001]: 134.

¹⁰Storms, *Tough Topics*, 238-9.

¹¹Storms, *Ibid.*, 238. He makes virtually the same argument in Storms, “Third Wave”, 187: “No one in the Old Testament is ever found to argue that since miraculous phenomena were ‘clustered’ at select points in redemptive history, we should not expect God to display his power in some other day.”

prophecy are the same,”¹² an unbiased assessor would still have to recognize “a consistent pattern of supernatural manifestations in the affairs of humanity”¹³ since prophecy itself is miraculous.

Storms puts it this way:

If Old Testament prophecy was of the same nature [as that in the New], then we have an example of a miraculous phenomenon running throughout the course of Israel’s history. In every age of Israel’s existence in which there was prophetic activity, there was miraculous activity. What then becomes of the assertion that miracles, even on the narrow definition, were infrequent and isolated?¹⁴

Storms does have a point; the Old Testament nowhere asserts that miracles have or will cease, and prophecy does occur at various times throughout Israel’s history. These facts, however, do not justify the inference that Old Testament signs and wonders continued uninterrupted into the New Testament. There are two problems with this argument. First, in attempting to prove that the ministry of prophets and miracle workers are the norm in Old Testament history, Storms misrepresents the very nature of miracles. Whether clustered or not, the miracles that the Old Testament Scriptures do report are anything but routine. It was the dramatic and supernatural nature of these miracles that moved Yahweh’s rebellious people and even Gentile rulers to acknowledge his majesty and to submit to his will. It is only because they are rare and abnormal that miracles matter.

Second, Storms does not have all the data he needs to make his case. Biblical history is not comprehensive. There are gaps in the reporting of events, gaps during which nothing is said about

¹²Storms, “Third Wave,” 190. As the second part of this paper will show, Storms himself does *not* believe that Old Testament and New Testament prophecy are the same.

¹³Ibid., 189.

¹⁴Ibid., 190.

anything, including signs and wonders. Thus, if Scripture were the only source of evidence, the most that Storms could logically argue is that the issue should be left open.¹⁵ In this case, however, there is more to consider. Scripture may be silent, but other factors suggest a real possibility that signs and wonders did cease in the era between the Old and New Testaments and possibly even earlier.

While the Scriptures are silent during the 400 years following the reign of Artaxerxes I (465–424 B.C.),¹⁶ there is historical evidence for a cessation of miracles between the Testaments. It is true that the intertestamental literature contains a number of miracle stories. Josephus, however, contends that the Jews did not treat this literature as fully reliable because there was no “exact succession of prophets”¹⁷ during that era. The “gift” of prophecy had apparently ceased. Josephus is not alone in this assessment. It is also found in the Apocrypha (e.g., 1 Maccabees 4:45b–46; 9:27; 14:41) and in Rabbinic literature (e.g., *Tosephta Sotah* 13.2, which identifies Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi as “the last of the prophets”).¹⁸ While not inerrant Scripture, these historical texts seem to suggest that signs and wonders ceased with the completion of the Old Testament canon—just as cessationists claim they did with the completion of the New.

Furthermore, the Scriptures themselves allow for a cessation of the miraculous even *within* Old Testament history. While Daniel attests to miracles and prophecy during the Babylonian exile,

¹⁵Here again Storms is correct: “the absence of evidence is not necessarily the evidence of absence!” (Storms, *Tough Topics*, 245.)

¹⁶While written well before the intertestamental period, the visions of Daniel 8 and 11 do summarize historical events during that era. Neither chapter reports any miracles, however.

¹⁷Josephus, *contra Apion* 1.8; 1.41.

¹⁸See F. David Farnell “Does the New Testament Teach Two Prophetic Gifts?,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150, no. 597 (January-March 1993): 389-90, n. 5.

Hebrew Scripture says nothing about later signs and wonders. The only miracles mentioned in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are the “signs and wonders” wrought by Yahweh during the Exodus one thousand years earlier (Nehemiah 9:10, et al.). Furthermore, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi clearly continue the ministry of prophecy, but the only miracles they mention are those associated with the eschaton (Zechariah 12–14 and Malachi 3–4). Of course, none of this actually “proves” that miraculous activity ceased after the return from Babylon, but it does show that an intertestamental cessation is possible, reasonable, and perhaps probable. Storms has not made his case.

While not acknowledging any waxing or waning in the occurrence of Old Testament signs and wonders, Storms does offer an explanation for their apparent infrequency at certain times:

Could it be that the relative infrequency of the miraculous was due to the rebellion, unbelief, and apostasy rampant in Israel throughout much of her history (cf. Pss. 74:9–11; 77:7–14)? . . . The point is that the comparative isolation of the miraculous in certain periods of Old Testament history could be due more to the recalcitrance of God’s people than to any supposed theological principle that dictates as normative a paucity of supernatural manifestations.¹⁹

In defense of this explanation, Storms appeals to the limitation of Jesus’ ministry at Nazareth, where “he could do no mighty work there [οὐκ ἐδύνατο ἐκεῖ ποιῆσαι]” except to heal a few sick people (Mark 6:5). Presumably, the reason for this “inability” was the people’s lack of faith (6:6), though the text does not explicitly say this. This argument assumes that the presence of human faith in some way and to some degree contributes to divine miracles. (At the very least, its absence hampers them.)

While explaining “the gifts of healings,” Storms makes this assumption explicit:

¹⁹Storms, “Third Wave,” 187. See also his amplification of this claim on pages 203–4, a somewhat simplified version of Deere’s explanation (Deere, *Surprised*, 145–159).

Perhaps “the prayer of faith” to which James (James 5:15) refers is not just any prayer that may be prayed at will, but a uniquely and divinely motivated prayer prompted by the Spirit-wrought conviction that God intends to heal the one for whom prayer is being offered. *The faith necessary for healing* is itself a gift of God, sovereignly bestowed when he wills . . . The particular kind of faith to which James refers, in response to which God heals, is not the kind that we can exercise at our will. It is the kind of faith we exercise only when God wills.²⁰

The Old Testament, however, shows no evidence of this limitation. In fact, it was during times of “rebellion, unbelief, and apostasy,” that signs and wonders were the most prevalent. Moses performed his miracles before an unbelieving Pharaoh and later before an unbelieving Israel. Elijah and Elisha ministered during the most apostate period of the northern kingdom. The rampant unbelief at the time had no apparent effect on God’s ability (or willingness) to perform miracles. In short, lack of faith seems to have little or no effect on Old Testament miracles.²¹

The same is true of New Testament miracles.²² Jesus performed most, if not all, of his miracles in an atmosphere of unbelief. Peter goes out of his way to emphasize that point in his message at Pentecost:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves

²⁰Storms, *Ibid.*, 214. Emphasis added. Note the “perhaps” at the beginning of the quotation. Contextually, Storms appears to be interpreting Scripture based on his own experience, the same subjective hermeneutic Fee criticizes in his fellow Pentecostals (Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*, 86) and that the third wave supposedly rejects.

²¹Logically, Storms seems to have inverted the relationship between faith and miracles. (Isn’t it more reasonable to assume that it is divine miracles that evoke human faith?) But even when the causal flow is reversed, his argument runs afoul of the biblical narrative. If these miracles were intended to *elicit* faith, they failed miserably. The Pharaoh quickly forgot the power of Yahweh and set out to recover his former slaves at the Red Sea. The exodus generation continued to doubt, and because of it, they ultimately died in the wilderness. The shallow repentance of the northern kingdom quickly evaporated, and Yahweh sent it into Assyrian captivity only 130 years later.

²²For a more complete discussion of this, see David E. Olander, “Signs, Miracles, and Wonders,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 10, no. 29 (2006): 28-30.

know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.²³

Like their Old Testament counterparts, New Testament miracles evoke faith only in those willing to take Scripture seriously. Jesus makes this very point in his account of the rich man in Hades (Luke 16:31): “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”²⁴

So what about Mark 6? It does seem to say that Jesus limited his miracles at Nazareth because of unbelief. What it does not say is that unbelief always, or even normally, has this effect. Jesus could and did perform miracles whenever his Father willed it. As Jesus himself testifies, “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30). It is God’s will, not man’s that makes the difference.²⁵ This is the teaching of both the Old Testament and the New. The case of Nazareth may be similar to that in Matthew 13, where Jesus used parables instead of clear teaching. Certainly, the explanation sounds similar: “This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Matthew 13:13). Many commentators understand the motive in both cases to be grace. By limiting their exposure to the truth that they insisted on rejecting, Jesus spared the Jews even greater punishment (cf. Matthew 11:21-24²⁶).

²³Acts 2:22-23 ESV. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2011).

²⁴See also Luke 24:25–27.

²⁵As shown in the quotation on pages 6–7 of this paper, Storms seems to agree, but strangely, he still attributes some sort of control to human will.

²⁶Note that this passage specifically associates miracles and judgment. The people of Chorazin will be judged more severely than Tyre and Sidon and those of Capernaum, more severely than Sodom because they had seen Christ’s “mighty

Issue Two. Two Types of Prophecy?

In an ironic twist, having argued that signs and wonders continued from the Old Testament into the New, major continuationists then insist that New Testament miracles are fundamentally different from those in the Old.²⁷ This idea seems to have begun with Wayne A. Grudem's analysis of New Testament prophecy. As he understands it, it is the apostles that correspond to Old Testament prophets; they were the chosen few who spoke with the authority of God's Word.²⁸ New Testament prophets, however, were just "ordinary Christians who spoke not with absolute divine authority, but simply to report something God had laid on their hearts or brought to their minds."²⁹ Although it is "the spontaneous, powerful working of the Holy Spirit, giving 'edification, encouragement, and comfort,'" ³⁰ ultimately, New Testament prophecy is no more than "an unreliable human speech act."³¹ In fact, according to Grudem, "there are many indications that this ordinary gift of prophecy had authority less than that of recognized Bible teaching in the early church."³²

works" and still rejected him.

²⁷The irony of this position is highlighted by Storms's tenth argument for continuationism: "the absence of any explicit or implicit notion that we should view spiritual gifts any differently than we do other New Testament practices and ministries" (Storms, *Tough Topics*, 242).

²⁸Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1982), 71. See also Storms, *Tough Topics*, 236–7.

²⁹Wayne A. Grudem, "Why Christians Can Still Prophecy: Scripture Encourages Us to Seek the Gift Yet Today," *Christianity Today* (16 September 1988): 30.

³⁰Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament*, 15.

³¹*Ibid.*, 95.

³²Grudem, "Why," 30.

Taken at face value, Grudem's position seems self-contradictory. How can the infallible God be responsible for a fallible message? To escape the apparent contradiction, continuationists redefine the term "prophecy." According to Storms, a prophecy is not a message from God per se, but "the human *report* of a divine *revelation*."³³ Understanding the term this way allows him then to tease the human aspect away from the divine: "The revelation, which is the root of every genuine prophetic utterance, is as inerrant and infallible as the written word of God itself (the Bible). In terms of the *revelation* alone, the New Testament prophetic gift does not differ from the Old Testament prophetic gift."³⁴ Thus, the problem is not with God, but with man. As Storms puts it, "The fact that God has *spoken* perfectly does not mean that human beings have *heard* perfectly."³⁵ In other words, the core revelation is infallible since it comes from God, but the prophet and his listeners are only fallible human beings. The prophet may misunderstand or misstate the message, and the listener may misapply it. In short, though it comes from God, the message of a New Testament prophecy is ultimately at the mercy of the prophet and his audience.³⁶ To establish scriptural support for this admittedly new perspective, Storms refers the reader to Acts 21, where Agabus's prophecy of Paul's arrest (21:11) proves "inaccurate" in two particulars: "It was the Romans who bound Paul, not the

³³Storms, "Third Wave," 207. The emphasis is that of Storms.

³⁴Ibid. The emphasis is that of Storms.

³⁵Ibid., 208.

³⁶Although irrelevant to the topic of this paper, it is remarkable that Storms, a staunch defender of biblical inerrancy, seems to be using the very arguments he rejects in those that deny inerrancy. One wonders what logic allows him to reject these arguments in one situation, but insist on them in the other.

Jews (21:33; 22:29); and far from the Jews delivering Paul into the hands of the Gentiles, he had to be forcibly rescued from them (21:31–46).³⁷

This argument does explain how erroneous New Testament prophecy could come from the inerrant God. Ultimately, however, it fails because it accounts for everything except what the Bible actually says. Contrary to the contention of Grudem and Storms, New Testament usage does not treat New Testament prophecy as something new and different from Old Testament prophecy.³⁸ Indeed, as Riddle notes, the book of Acts uses the term *προφήτης* (prophet) indiscriminately of both Old and New Testament men.³⁹ The term occurs 30 times in Acts; most refer to Old Testament prophets. There are fifteen references to Old Testament prophets in general, usually the prophets of the Hebrew canon (Acts 3:18, 21, 24, 25; 7:42, 52; 10:43; 13:15, 27, 40; 15:15; 24:14; 26:22, 27; 28:23), but the book also designates five Old Testament figures as prophets: Moses (3:22, 23; 7:37), Samuel (3:24; 13:20), David (2:30), Isaiah (7:49,⁴⁰ 8:28, 30, 34; 28:25), and Joel (2:16). Of the five references to New Testament prophets, one refers to New Testament prophets in general (11:27). The others name eight men in the early church as prophets: Agabus (11:28; 21:10), Barnabus, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, Saul [Paul] (13:1), Judas, and Silas (15:32). Neither the immediate nor the broader contexts

³⁷Ibid. Storms seems to be summarizing the argument of Grudem in *Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament*, 96–102. Grudem goes even further, arguing that Paul properly *disobeyed* the prophecies in Acts 21:4–5, 13–14, thus proving that he did not treat New Testament prophecy as having authority equal to Scripture. Oldham (“Gift of Prophecy, 126–8) refutes this conclusion at length.

³⁸It is beyond the scope of this paper to account for all the problems with Grudem’s position. For a more thorough evaluation of the continuationist arguments for two levels of New Testament prophecy, see Farnell, “Two Prophetic Gifts?,” 62–88.

³⁹Jeffrey T. Riddle, “Are the Daughters of Philip Among the Prophets of Acts?” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 11, no. 1 (2006): 21–2. See also Oldham, “Gift of Prophecy,” 116–117.

⁴⁰The prophet quoted is Isaiah (66:1–2).

of these passages suggest any difference in the sense of the term “prophet.” Indeed, there are good reasons to assume that the sense is always the same. “Prophet” was a familiar term with a recognized and definite meaning.⁴¹ If Luke is introducing a new, technical sense, he should make the difference clear and then help the reader recognize which sense he intends in each context. Since he does neither, the reader may logically assume that he uses the term in its familiar sense throughout the book.

Furthermore, the reports of actual New Testament prophetic ministry found in the Book of Acts bear no resemblance to the “unreliable speech act” posited by Grudem. In Acts 21, Agabus’s prophetic ministry closely resembles that of the Old Testament prophets. While Bruce’s analysis of the passage does not intentionally confront Grudem’s explanation, it makes a strong case against it:

The mode of his [Agabus’s] prophecy is reminiscent of much Old Testament prophecy: it is conveyed in action as well as in word. As Ahijah the Shilonite tore his new cloak to show how Solomon’s kingdom would be disrupted (1 Kings 11:29–39), as Isaiah went about naked and barefoot to show how the Egyptians would be led into captivity by the Assyrians (Isa. 20:2–4), as Ezekiel mimicked the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem by laying siege himself to a replica of the city (Ezek. 4:1–3), so Agabus foretold the binding of Paul by tying himself up with Paul’s girdle.⁴²

Even more telling is the way Agabus introduces his prophecy: “Thus says the Holy Spirit” (*τάδε λέγει τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον*). As Marshall observes, the construction “corresponds to ‘Thus says the Lord’ on the lips of Old Testament prophets.”⁴³ This does not sound like a man reporting “a very

⁴¹Oldham develops this argument (“Gift of Prophecy,” 114-5).

⁴²F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 2d ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 401.

⁴³Marshall, *Acts* Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity, 1980), 340. The LXX renders the phrase as *τάδε λέγει κύριος*.

human—and sometimes partially mistaken—report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone’s mind.”⁴⁴ This sounds more like Isaiah or Joel.

But what about Agabus’s “errors”? How can they be accounted for? In this case, it seems that error, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Grudem and Storms are not the only scholars to see the apparent discrepancy in Luke’s account. Instead of factual error, however, commentators have traditionally treated the differences as a rhetorical device intended to show that Paul endured an experience comparable to that of his Lord. For example, Marshall acknowledges the very things that Storms and Grudem mention, but he accounts for them without finding Agabus inaccurate:

The prophecy was not fulfilled in so many words: although the Jews seized Paul, they did not hand him over to the Romans, but rather the Romans rescued him from them, while keeping him in custody. The form of Agabus’s wording is meant no doubt to bring out more clearly the fates of Jesus and of Paul. In any case, the Jews could be regarded as responsible for the fact that Paul fell into the hands of the Romans and remained in custody (cf. 28:17).⁴⁵

Bruce makes a similar observation: “The prophecy is couched in words similar to those used by our Lord of Himself (Mk. X.33, παραδώσουσιν αὐτὸν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν [they will deliver him over to the Gentiles]).”⁴⁶ In other words, Paul’s arrest occurred as predicted; the Holy Spirit merely adjusted the wording to highlight how closely Paul’s experience paralleled that of Christ.

The preceding discussion was motivated by the fact that the nature of New Testament prophecy is not just a matter of exegetical or theological debate. It also has practical implications both for the church and for individual Christians. If New Testament prophets are liable to error, as

⁴⁴Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament*, 14.

⁴⁵I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, 340.

⁴⁶Bruce, *Acts* (English), 388. Farnell develops this at some length in “Two Prophetic Gifts?,” 72–73.

Grudem and other third wave advocates claim, how can anyone know what parts of their messages to accept?

If, however, Old and New Testament prophecy are the same, then one can apply the two tests of a true prophet found in Deuteronomy 13 and 18. The first is the test of doctrine (Deuteronomy 13:1–5):

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, “Let us go after other gods,” which you have not known, “and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

In Israel, every purported spokesman for Yahweh was to be evaluated by the truth that God had already revealed in Scripture. It did not matter how dramatic his signs and wonders were or how accurate his prophecies. If his message drew God’s people away from the life and worship prescribed in the Scriptures, he was to be executed, and his message, ignored.

While it does not authorize church congregations to execute violators, New Testament Scripture does require them to apply the test of doctrine to those who speak in God’s name. In 1 John 4:1-3, John tells believers to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world” (4:1). He then specifies the test they are to use, the test of doctrine: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the

spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already” (4:2–3). In 1 Corinthians 12:3, Paul appears to propose the same test: “Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.” When it comes to New Testament prophets, therefore, the church is to apply the same principle as Israel before them: by their truth you shall know them.

The second test, accuracy, is more familiar to most modern believers: “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him” (Deuteronomy 18:22). The New Testament never explicitly commands the use of this test, but at least one account seems to assume it. When exorcists at Ephesus conjured “by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims,” the demon responded, “Jesus I know and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” (Acts 19:13–17). Their failure demonstrates that they were not sent from God, as Paul was. Does not the principle also apply to purported New Testament prophets? If they fail to get their facts straight, how can they be from God?

Grudem acknowledges that for an Old Testament prophecy to be considered a genuine message of God, that message (and the messenger) must pass both tests.⁴⁷ He insists, however, that in the New Testament, prophecies were not tested, but “sifted.” Their true parts were distinguished from human error by the corporate judgment of the entire congregation. He finds this procedure in 1 Corinthians 14:29: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.”⁴⁸ There

⁴⁷Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament*, 138.

⁴⁸Ibid., 76-7.

are a number of difficulties with this interpretation, but for the sake of brevity, this paper notes only the most crucial one.⁴⁹ Grudem's interpretation is not the most natural reading of the text. Taken at face value, the passage seems to be prescribing the test of doctrine (as in 1 Corinthians 12:2 and 1 John 4:1–3). In other words, he is asserting “either that the prophets or the congregation had the responsibility to listen to the words of the prophet and judge—as the people of the Old Testament were instructed to do—whether what was being said was consistent with the teachings of the apostles.”⁵⁰ If this is what the text is saying, however, Grudem's concept of New Testament prophecy cannot be correct since, as Oldham points out, such prophecies fail both tests:

To the degree that a person claims to be a prophet or to be sharing a prophecy and is only sharing his thoughts, he has ceased to be a prophet. He speaks either presumptuously or has been demonically prompted. He is a false prophet. All true prophets command authority because the revelation they have received comes with the authority of its Author, God Himself.⁵¹

Thus, the situation for the Grudem, Storms, and other third wave proponents appears to be hopeless. If they are right, then the prophecies they find so beneficial cannot be validated. On the other hand, if they are wrong, they are guilty of encouraging false prophets, a very serious sin.

While the question of prophecy has generated the most discussion, Third Wave proponents also see the same qualitative differences between Old and New Testament in other miraculous manifestations. Thus, Storms argues that cessationists regularly experience miracles, but because of

⁴⁹For a more thorough critique, see Oldham, “Gift of Prophecy,” 121–3.

⁵⁰Ibid., 122-3.

⁵¹Ibid., 118.

their doctrinal presuppositions, they “dismiss them as something less than the miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit” that they really are:

Someone with the gift of discerning spirits may be described as possessing remarkable sensitivity and insight. Someone with the gift of word of knowledge is rather said to have a deep understanding of spiritual truths. . . . These churches wouldn’t be caught dead labeling such phenomena by the names given them in 1 Corinthians 12:7–10.⁵²

To make this argument work, Storms indulges in circular reasoning. First, he assumes that the traits he mentions actually reflect the miraculous gifts found in 1 Corinthians 12,⁵³ then he uses that assumption to show that cessationists regularly experience the miraculous. Not only that, Storms also implicitly redefines the concept of miracle. By definition, a miracle is something special, something notable. To treat it as Storms does blurs the line between the mundane and the miraculous. Furthermore, the modern “miracles” in Storms’s examples bear no resemblance to the magnificent works recorded in either the Old or the New Testaments.

Conclusion

What then should be the attitude of cessationists toward their continuationist brothers? After giving “twelve bad reasons for being a cessationist” and “twelve good reasons for being a continuationist,” Storms suggests that there should be an atmosphere of collegial dialogue:

Let us keep one thing in mind as we continue to search the Scriptures regarding this matter. This is not an issue, in my opinion, over which Christians should part company. Disagree? Yes. Divide? No. As we continue to dialogue on this matter, let’s commit ourselves to remain “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).”⁵⁴

⁵²Storms, *Tough Topics*, 247.

⁵³Storms’s examples presuppose that the church has a clear understanding of what “discerning of spirits” and “word of knowledge” entail. The Scriptures, however, neither define nor exemplify either term.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 251.

Given the potential for grievous error, however, it is difficult to treat the differences as mere academic squabbling. There is no doubt that some have gone too far in their opposition to third wave teaching and practice, but is there not an equally dangerous extreme—that of minimizing things that really matter? As Storms notes, the church is bound to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3), but it is also commanded to “watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them” (Romans 16:17). Without resorting to heresy trials, cessationists should point out the major theological and practical problems associated with third wave continuationists and eschew close associations with them. In this case, division does go too far, but academic disagreement is not enough. The better response is distance.