

# New Theological Viruses Affecting the Church

by DAVID GUNN

Since its inception, the church has waged a long, hard struggle against theological error. “Beware false prophets,” Jesus warned His disciples, “who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15). Sure enough, false teachings arose almost as soon as there were congregations to lead astray, prompting Peter to write, “Beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked” (2 Pet. 3:17). Jude, too, echoed this sentiment: “I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3).

But while the threat of heresy has been ever-present, its precise shape has varied from generation to generation. Almost a century ago, our association of churches was birthed on the battlefield of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy as orthodox traditionalists squared off against liberal progressives. Today, the specter of liberal theology has mostly faded away. In its place a host of other heresies has arisen, threatening to rob the church of its spiritual vitality and contaminate its life-giving message.

Although we should never pursue controversy for its own sake, we must expose false teachings wherever they appear so the people of God can take notice and inoculate themselves. This article will attempt to survey and diagnose a few of the most pressing theological viruses making the rounds today, and to issue some preliminary prescriptions for how they can be guarded against. The maxim is as true in theology as it is in medicine: *an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*

## Resurgent Continuationism

*Continuationism* refers to the belief that all or most of the spiritual gifts—including the sign and revelatory gifts such as speaking in tongues and prophecy—have continued up to the present day. It stands in contrast to *cessationism*, which holds that the sign and revelatory gifts were designated for a specific unique purpose during the Apostolic Age, and that they ceased to operate when that age reached its conclusion around the end of the first century.

Strictly speaking, continuationism is not a *new* theological virus. It has been one of the benchmarks of the Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Third Wave movements and has exerted an influence on American Christianity for over a century. What

makes this a *new* theological virus is its increasing acceptance in mainstream evangelical and Baptist circles. The culprit is the increasingly popular New Calvinism. Michael Patton writes,

There is a very strong charismatic openness in the New Calvinism that was not present before. Previously, practically all Calvinists were cessationists, believing that the supernatural gifts of the Spirit ceased in the first century. Now there are many who are continuationists, believing that the supernatural sign gifts are still in effect today.

In his works *Systematic Theology* and *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, Wayne Grudem builds a case for continuationism that has won the hearts of many. In addition to offering a critique of the standard cessationist interpretation of several key New Testament passages, Grudem argues for a new understanding of how the spiritual gift of prophecy functions in the New Testament church. On Grudem’s view, Old Testament prophets exercised their gift in such a way that they infallibly and inerrantly reported the very words of God, but New Testament prophets did not. Rather, “prophecy in ordinary New Testament churches was not equal to Scripture in authority, but simply a very human—and sometimes partially mistaken—report of something the Holy Spirit brought to someone’s mind.” This being the case, it is then incumbent upon the Christian (guided by the Holy Spirit, of course) to determine which parts of a prophetic utterance are God’s perfect revelation and which parts are man’s fallible opinions. “One manifestation may be 75% God, but 25% the person’s own thoughts,” Grudem writes. “We must discern between the two.”

It is on the basis of this understanding of prophecy that John Piper (another influential thought leader in the New Calvinism movement) seeks the ability to prophesy and encourages others to do the same:

I advocate obedience to 1 Corinthians 12:31, ‘earnestly desire the higher gifts.’ And I advocate obedience to 1 Corinthians 14:1, ‘earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you might prophesy.’ And I advocate obedience to 1 Corinthians 14:39, ‘earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.’ I want Christians today to obey those texts.

At the same time that resurgent continuationism has gained traction in New Calvinist circles, other traditionally cessationist camps have relaxed their view on the sign gifts. Dan Wallace of Dallas Theological Seminary has proposed a view called *Concentric Cessationism*, which postulates that the sign and revelatory gifts have basically ceased in areas where the church and the gospel witness have been well established, but that they continue to operate in heavily unevangelized areas.

Similarly, those aligned with progressive dispensationalism have tended to move away from cessationism to a view that is characterized as “open but cautious.” No doubt the debate over the nature and operation of these spiritual gifts will only intensify over the next few years.

### Diagnosis

Resurgent continuationism has the potential of introducing catastrophic confusion into the life and witness of the church. While many Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Third Wave Christians earnestly desire to please the Lord and worship Him with a holy passion, we cannot help but observe that the continuationist theology embraced by these movements has tended to result in an unhealthy emotionalism, a subjectivity in discerning the will of God, and an outlook that is dangerously man-centered. It is difficult to envision a scenario in which the New Calvinists are able to drink deeply of the continuationist waters while successfully avoiding these attendant pitfalls.

Resurgent continuationism’s understanding of the gift of prophecy is especially troubling to me. If we accept a view that allows God’s perfect revelation to be mixed with fallible human opinions and impulses, haven’t we tacitly abandoned one of the pillars of our belief in Scriptural inerrancy (namely, that God’s self-disclosure could not possibly be delivered in an imperfect way since He Himself is perfect and inerrant)? It seems to me that such an approach leaves the door wide open for a neoorthodox understanding of Scripture’s nature and authority.

### Prescription

Although cessationism has clearly become untrendy, I think there are very solid Biblical and theological reasons for maintaining it. But the cessationist must move beyond proof-texting. Our apologetic for cessationism should include, at minimum, the following ingredients:

- The historical evidence that the sign and revelatory gifts did indeed cease roughly at the conclusion of the Apostolic Era.
- The massive qualitative and quantitative differences between the signs and wonders allegedly being performed in continuationist circles today and those that are recorded in the New Testament. (This is especially damaging to those continuationists who would seek to apply John 14:12 to healings, prophecies, and tongues-speaking today. I have yet to witness a contemporary signs and wonders ministry that could credibly claim to outdo Jesus in the miracle-working department!)
- The presence of charismatic phenomena (ecstatic unintelligible speech, prophecies, and healings) in non-Christian religions. Many of these phenomena are strikingly similar to those observed in Christian continuationist circles. We should be very reluctant to attribute these phenomena to the Holy Spirit when they appear in Christians circles, but should dismiss them as spurious or demonically inspired wherever else they occur.

- A challenge to our continuationist friends to explain *why* God ostensibly saw fit to weaken the authority of prophecy after the coming of Christ. It is exceedingly odd (to say the least) that every other spiritual blessing should be amplified in the Church Age but that prophecy should suddenly become less authoritative.

Finally, we cessationists should be careful to define our position with precision. We do *not* hold that miracles have ceased, only that certain spectacular *spiritual gifts* have ceased. God continues to work miracles whenever and wherever He sees fit.

### The Minimalist Gospel

I have a tremendous amount of respect for the late Zane Hodges and the free grace movement he helped to launch. In an era when so much theology and preaching is directed toward examining people’s good works (or the lack thereof) and on that basis undermining their assurance of salvation, Hodges’ singular focus on the super-abounding grace of God was refreshing. And yet, it is always possible to take things too far. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Hodges began espousing a minimalist view of the gospel of Jesus Christ. His aim was to define clearly “the core issue in bringing men and women to faith and eternal life” so that the gospel could be proclaimed in its irreducible simplicity without adding extraneous details and thereby complicating the task of evangelism. This led him to formulate a view that some critics have dubbed “the crossless gospel.”

On this view, all that is necessary for someone to be saved is that they understand that someone named Jesus offers them eternal life and that they trust Him to do so. Facts about who Jesus is and what He did to secure salvation for sinners are viewed as nonessential components to the saving gospel. Hodges explains, “The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.” To illustrate this, Hodges invites us to imagine an unsaved man with no knowledge of the Bible stranded on a deserted island. One day a bottle floats to the shore containing a scrap of paper with a partial copy of John 6:43 and 47 written on it: “Jesus therefore answered and said to them. . . . Most assuredly I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.” Hodges explains,

Suppose that our unsaved man somehow becomes convinced that this person called Jesus can guarantee everlasting life. In other words, he believes Jesus’ words in John 6:47. Is he saved? I suspect that there are some grace people who would say that this man is not saved because he doesn’t know enough. For example, he doesn’t know that Jesus died for his sons on the cross and rose again the third day. . . . But why is he *not* saved if he believes the promise of Jesus’ words?

Similarly, Robert Wilkin has postulated that it would be theoretically possible for a person to believe in Jesus for eternal life and then, upon entering Heaven, learn for the first time that Jesus not only saved him, but also died for his sins and rose from the dead.

## Diagnosis

This view is dangerous, not only in that it denigrates (intentionally or not) the richness of the gospel story, but also in that it elevates Jesus' *name* above His identity and activity in a quasi-superstitious manner. To demonstrate this, let us alter Hodges' deserted island analogy slightly. Suppose that whoever placed the partial gospel text into the bottle had tampered with it first by replacing the name "Jesus" with "Allah," so the castaway ends up believing in *Allah* for eternal life. Does he receive salvation? Presumably not. But why not? The man's cognitive understanding of whom he is trusting for eternal life is the same in both scenarios. He simply got the name wrong in one of them, and that makes all the difference between saving faith on the one hand and ineffectual delusion on the other.

Surely this is wrongheaded. It is not the name *Jesus* that saves, as though arranging the letters or vocalizing the sounds in the proper sequence were the determinative factor in saving faith. Rather, it is the *identity* of the Savior and the efficacy of His work that is important. Otherwise we run the risk of slipping into superstition on the one hand or soteriological inclusivism on the other.

## Prescription

Students of the Word must always bear in mind that context is key in interpretation. When we encounter New Testament passages that prescribe *belief in Jesus* as the sole condition for salvation (e.g. John 1:12, 3:14–17, 6:47; Acts 16:31; Rom. 1:16), they are meant to be read in the context of an extensive body of canonical literature in which both the person and work of Jesus are explained in detail. Thus we understand that when Paul "preached Christ" he was not merely acting as a PR man for the name *Jesus* as though it were a brand or slogan. Rather, he was proclaiming a clearly defined message that included both Christ's identity and His salvific activity (e.g., see 1 Corinthians 2:2; 15:3–8).

Granted, we might quibble over precisely how much cognitive information about Jesus, who He is and what He did, is necessary in order to exercise saving faith. But it seems evident from even a cursory reading of the New Testament that at least *some* rudimentary cognitive content is necessary beyond simply trusting the bare proposition that someone named Jesus offers eternal life. That is certainly a part of the gospel, but not all of it. Let us strive to preach the gospel in all of its blessed fullness, to the praise of His glory.

## Ancient-Future Christianity

Ancient-future Christianity is not a *movement* so much as it is an *impulse*. Its origins can be viewed both as a reaction against the perceived shallowness and insular individualism of seeker-sensitive-era evangelicalism, and as a desire to contextualize (or some critics might say *accommodate*) Christianity for a postmodern culture. Simply defined, the ancient-future impulse is the desire to restore a sense of historical rootedness and traditionalism to the church by

returning to the practices and patterns of ancient worship. The late Robert Webber, the brainchild of ancient-future Christianity, liked to express the impulse this way: "The road to the future runs through the past." Emerging church leader Brian McLaren, one of the leading spokesmen for ancient-future thinking, similarly opined, "When the community of faith realizes it has lost its way, it begins looking forward by moving back. . . . It looks to its ancient practices to help it reset its future course."

Just how ancient is *ancient*? There is no single authoritative answer, but Webber suggested the second to seventh centuries as the ideal span from which to draw ancient-future practices. Some ancient-future thinkers and practitioners will extend the window to include features from later in the medieval period, but as a rule they tend to restrict themselves to pre-Renaissance (and, hence, pre-Reformation) timeframes.

So, drawing on the liturgy of the ancient Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, ancient-future congregations seek to infuse their worship and ecclesiastical functions with sage wisdom and sacred gravitas. This results in a "high church" approach to the ministries of the church. Typically, the rationalism of Reformation and post-Reformation is frowned upon, while a greater emphasis is placed upon mystery, paradox, and mysticism. A subjective encounter with the divine is highly valued and sought by means of icons, incense, and candles. Adherents to this approach feel that it is more likely than standard contemporary approaches to satisfy the postmodern yearning for tradition and community, and to jibe with postmodern disdain for metaphysical certainty.

## Diagnosis

The potentially ruinous consequences of this approach to church ministry can scarcely be overstated. It seems self-evident that flirtation with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox expressions of church worship will inevitably pave the way for a return to Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theology, which we fundamentalists and evangelicals would regard as outright heretical in places. An emphasis on icons, statues, candles, and incense caused the ancient churches to drift into idolatry. The Protestant repudiation of these practices was a major victory for the preeminence of Jesus Christ and the unadorned simplicity of the gospel message. Far be it from us to surrender such hard-fought gains by embracing ancient forms of worship.

The emphasis upon mysticism and mystery is also alarming. Granted, some passages of Scripture are difficult to understand. And some of the issues of theology are staggeringly complex and beyond exhaustive comprehension by finite men and women. Nevertheless, God's self-disclosure was intended as a revelation, not an obfuscation. Scripture was given not "that you may wonder," but rather "that you may *know*" (e.g., Eph. 1:18; 1 John 5:13). And while we would grant that there is a legitimate subjective dimension to the Christian life, we would nevertheless urge extreme

caution where mystical theology is concerned. This branch of ancient thinking is fundamentally anti-intellectual in that it seeks to achieve ecstatic, contemplative states of mind that transcend both the cognitive and physical domains. It is an approach not dissimilar to the way the Corinthian Christians were abusing the gift of tongues. Paul condemned this practice in no uncertain terms because it resulted in an active spirit but an unfruitful mind (1 Cor. 14:14ff.). Rejecting or denigrating the cognitive dimension in Christianity is not a mark of deep profundity, but of spiritual immaturity.

### Prescription

I will make one concession to the ancient-future impulse: it is probably correct in its complaint that much of contemporary evangelicalism and fundamentalism has too often had a shaky grasp of church history. Undoubtedly, historical myopia cannot help but create doctrinal blind spots and stunt theological development. And yet, the solution to this problem is not to imbibe the liturgical practices of the ancient Catholic and Orthodox churches. Rather, it is to undertake a study of church history that is both sympathetic in attitude yet critical in methodology.

When this is done, I am convinced that the resulting picture of ancient Christianity will be less sanguine than our ancient-future friends would like it to be. As the Christian message

spread, it gradually came into contact with philosophies like Neoplatonism, which resulted in an inadequate approach to interpreting Scripture. Similarly, with the conversion of Emperor Constantine, a disastrous tendency toward syncretism introduced all manner of pagan practices and rituals into the life and rhythm of the church. Consequently, a great deal of the liturgy that arose in the second to seventh centuries was contaminated by theological concepts that were incompatible with Biblical teaching.

I applaud the desire to traverse the corridors of time and recover ancient wisdom, but perhaps God's people would be better served by reconnecting with the theology of the first-century church than with that of the medieval era. And, of course, the principal source for that century's theology is nothing other than the New Testament. In the final analysis, to be properly *ancient* in thought and practice is simply to be *Biblical*. This should come as no surprise to those who love the Book and have taken its self-characterizations to heart. Among those self-characterizations are these words of Peter, with which I conclude: "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19). **B**

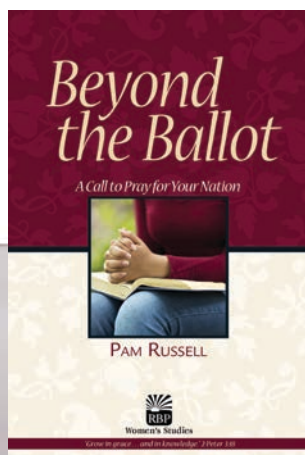
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*David Gunn is managing editor of the Baptist Bulletin.*



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