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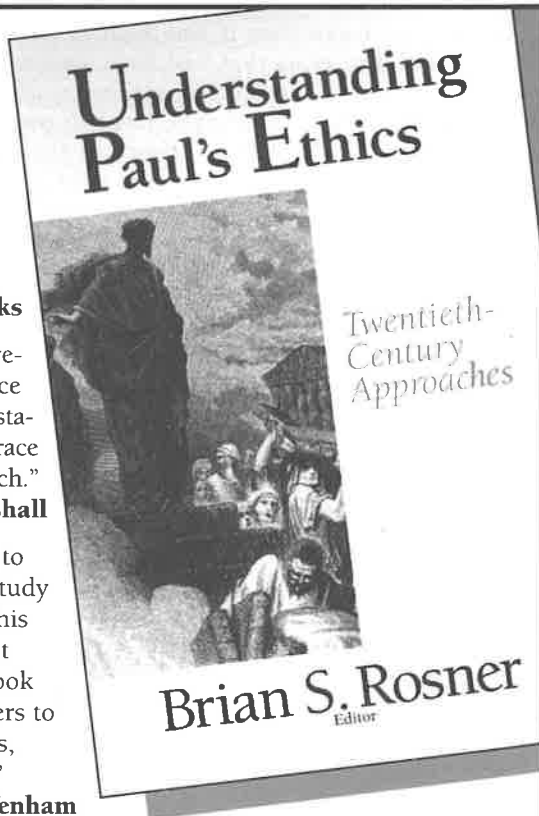
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## MODERN SPIRITUAL GIFTS AS ANALOGOUS TO APOSTOLIC GIFTS: AFFIRMING EXTRAORDINARY WORKS OF THE SPIRIT WITHIN CESSATIONIST THEOLOGY

VERN SHERIDAN POYTHRESS\*

I maintain that modern spiritual gifts are analogous to but not identical with the divinely authoritative gifts exercised by the apostles. Since there is no strict identity, apostolic teaching and the Biblical canon have exclusive divine authority. On the other hand, since there is analogy, modern spiritual gifts are still genuine and useful to the Church. Hence there is a middle way between blanket approval and blanket rejection of modern charismatic gifts.

### I. CHRISTOCENTRICITY OF GIFTS

To develop this view we need several crucial distinctions. First, we need a Biblical framework for thinking about gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The NT itself provides resources for a theology of spiritual gifts. One key passage is found in Eph 4:7-11. Jesus Christ is head of the Church and distributor of all gifts of the Spirit (v. 11). He distributes gifts from the fullness that he himself possesses, because he has triumphed (v. 8) and fills all things (v. 10). Acts 2:33 supplements this picture by saying that Christ "received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit" as a prelude to pouring out the Spirit on the Church. From Christ's fullness of the Spirit we receive a measure "as Christ apportioned it" (Eph 4:7).

These reflections naturally lead to the conclusion that our ministry in the Spirit is analogous to, as well as subordinate to, the ministry of Christ. For example, Christ is the final great prophet (Acts 3:22-26). Through the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost we all become subordinate prophets (2:17-18). Christ is the chief shepherd (1 Pet 5:4), the ruler over the Church. Through the Spirit he appoints subordinate shepherds (5:1-3; Acts 20:28) and gives gifts of ruling and administering and caring for the flock (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11 ["pastors"]). Christ came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28). He also gives gifts of service (Rom 12:7-8) and calls on us "to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16).

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The work of Christ for us can be conveniently classified under the traditional triad of offices: prophet, king, priest.<sup>1</sup> Christ speaks to us (prophet), he rules over us (king), and he gives his life in service for us (priest). All three functions occur together in Heb 1:1-3. When we are united to Christ we are transformed into his likeness and bear his image (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29; Eph 4:24). We become prophets who speak his word to others (Col 3:16). We become kings who exercise authority in his name over the areas for which we are responsible (Eph 2:6; 6:4). We become priests who serve one another (1 John 3:16).

The relevant Scriptural passages show that these things are true of everyone who believes in Christ. But not everyone is equally gifted in every area (Eph 4:7). Where speaking gifts are strong, people become recognized teachers (4:11). Where ruling gifts are strong, people become recognized elders or shepherds (1 Pet 5:1-4). Where serving gifts are strong, people become recognized as servers and givers of mercy. Some have suggested that we may correlate this service particularly with the ministry of deacons (which is supported by the fact that the key word *diakonia* means "service").

The three categories of prophetic, kingly and priestly gifts are not rigidly separated from one another. Both in Christ's life and in the lives of his people there are typically combinations. For example, pastoring involves both providing nourishment for sheep through the word of Christ (a prophetic function) and leading and protecting the sheep (a kingly function). The boundaries between these areas are fuzzy, but we can nevertheless recognize here distinct foci or emphases.

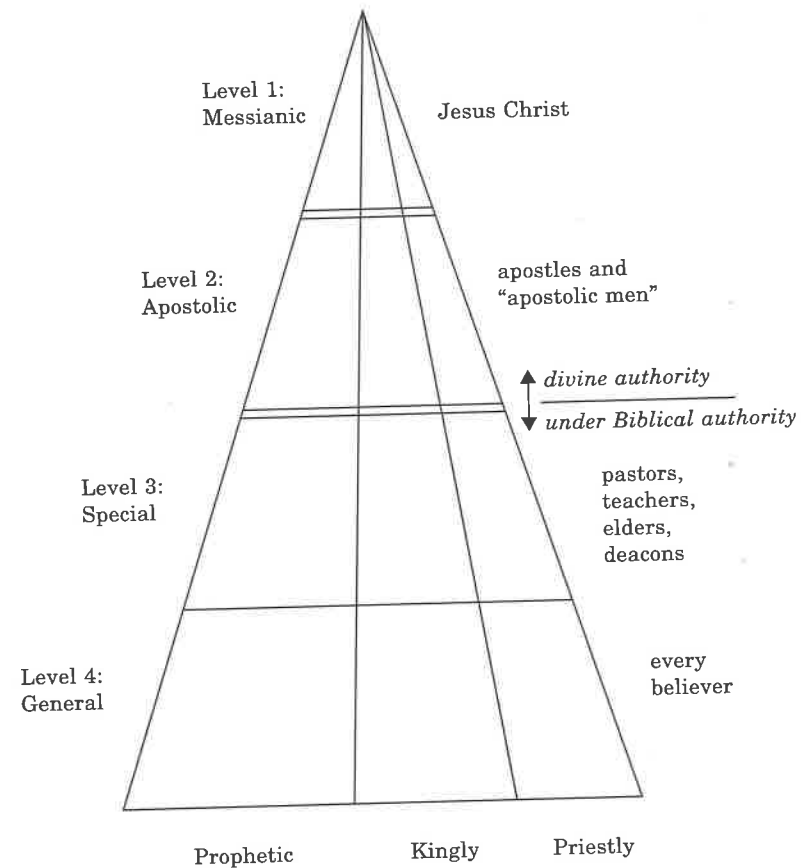
All the gifts mentioned in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 can be roughly classified as prophetic, kingly or priestly. For example, gifts of wisdom and knowledge are prophetic, while gifts of administration, miraculous powers and healing are kingly. But some gifts could easily be classified in more than one way. For example, healing could be seen as priestly, since it is an exercise of mercy toward the person healed. Ultimately, prophetic, kingly and priestly functions can be expanded into perspectives on the whole life of God's people, so we should not be disturbed by the apparent overlap. This classification is nevertheless useful in reminding us of our relation to the work of Christ and in reminding us that no one of the lists of gifts in the NT is intended to be exhaustive.

## II. A PYRAMID OF GIFTEDNESS

Because the gifts have varying functions and intensities, the NT recognizes several levels of functioning for prophetic, kingly and priestly gifts (see diagram 1). What are they?

<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. the *Heidelberg Catechism* Q. 31; the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 8.1; *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Qq. 23-26.

Diagram 1<sup>2</sup>  
SPIRITUAL GIFTS



First and foremost, there is messianic giftedness (level 1). Christ alone has a fullness of the Spirit to equip him as final prophet, king and priest in a definitive way.

Second, there is apostolic or foundational giftedness (level 2). Christ appointed the apostles as witnesses (Acts 1:21-22). On the basis of what they had directly seen and heard, and on the basis of the work of the Holy Spirit inspiring them, they could testify authoritatively for all time concerning

<sup>2</sup> With some alterations this diagram derives from the classroom teaching of Edmund P. Clowney.

what Christ accomplished. In their verbal witness they had an unrepeatable prophetic role. The apostles and closely associated "apostolic men" like Mark, Luke and Jude produced the canon of the NT.

Similarly the apostles made foundational decisions concerning the rule or shepherding of the NT Church. They led it through its first crises (Acts 6; 8; 10-11; 15; 20). Thus they had an unrepeatable kingly role. The apostles appointed the first deacons and so stabilized the ministry of service and mercy (6:1-7). In all these areas the role of the apostles is unrepeatable.

Third, we have the level of prominent, repeatable gifts (level 3). People may be officially recognized by the Church when they have strong gifts in teaching, ruling and giving mercy. Traditionally, Reformed ecclesiology has designed this level "special office." It includes the teachers, elders and deacons in the Church.

Finally, we have the level of involvement of every believer (level 4). As Scripture shows, every believer united to Christ is made a prophet, a king and a priest in a broad sense.

The distinction between gifts with full divine authority and subordinate (uninspired) gifts is now clear. Jesus Christ is God (John 1:1; 20:28) and is the Lord of the Church (Eph 5:24). His work has full divine authority. The apostles and apostolic men are commissioned by Christ and bear his authority. Hence their words and official actions have divine authority (cf. e.g. 1 Cor 14:37; 1 Thess 2:13). In particular, words of the apostles in the exercise of their office are inspired in the technical sense. Inspired words are words spoken by God himself, words breathed out by God (2 Tim 3:16), and hence they carry unqualified divine authority.

The Holy Spirit also works in a subordinate way in giving teaching and speaking gifts to pastors, teachers and ordinary believers (Eph 4:11; Col 4:6). The speeches that these people give are not inspired—that is, the speeches are not identically the speech of God in such a way that they carry unqualified divine authority and perfection.

Such speeches may nevertheless be inspiring in the popular sense of the word. We acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is present. We thank God for the gifts that are exercised, and we know that when properly exercised they come from the power of the Spirit. But the results are always fallible and must be checked by the standard of the Bible. The necessity of testing later works by Scripture is implied by the finality of revelation in Christ (Heb 1:1-3), the foundational character of the teaching of the apostles (Eph 2:20), and the fact that the canon of Scripture is complete. The best representatives of both charismatic and noncharismatic views agree.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On the charismatic side see e.g. W. A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester: Crossway, 1988) 277-297; on the noncharismatic side H. Ridderbos, *The Authority of New Testament Scripture* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963); R. B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 89-93.

### III. AWARENESS OF BASIS FOR WORDS AND ACTION

We can also classify the functioning of gifts of the Spirit in many other ways that cut across the classifications that we have already established. For example, we may distinguish among gifts exercised toward God, toward fellow Christians, and toward the world (those outside the Christian community).<sup>4</sup> For my purposes it is convenient to introduce a distinction that focuses on people's awareness of a basis for their ideas or actions.

First, at times people may consciously derive ideas for their actions from particular passages of the Bible. For example, a teacher giving an expository sermon consciously bases the sermon on one particular passage of the Bible. An elder counseling a young person tempted to drunkenness may consciously base his advice on passages warning about drunkenness. A deacon consoling someone in a personal tragedy may consciously have in mind Rom 12:15. Let us call this type of exercise of a gift a discursive process. The action is inferred from one or more passages of the Bible.

Second, at other times people may act on hunches or feelings or intuition. They sense that they should say or do a particular thing. They may see a situation and spontaneously react. Or they may have special visions or auditions. But in these cases they are not consciously aware of a particular passage of the Bible or a set of passages that form the sole basis for their experience. Their experience springs from a personal impulse that they do not—perhaps cannot—further analyze. Let us call such instances nondiscursive processes.

Third, people may act with partial awareness of the basis for action. For example, they compare their own situation with some model situation in the Bible. They intuitively sense that their situation is parallel to the Biblical situation but without being aware of all the factors relevant to judging the nature of the comparison. Such processes are partly discursive. We may call them mixed processes or creative-discerning processes. For many people in many situations this third kind of mixed process may well be the most common. But for simplicity we will focus largely on the more one-sided processes—namely, discursive and nondiscursive.

All three of the above labels are intended to be descriptive, not evaluative—that is, we are at this point describing what various people may do, without either approving or disapproving.

We can give examples from the NT of all three types of processes. Most apostolic preaching involved discursive processes. "From morning till evening he [Paul] explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe" (Acts 28:23-24). Paul relied on the Law of Moses and the Prophets, which shows a discursive process. Similarly the apostolic sermons in Acts appealed to specific texts of the OT and put together arguments. The

<sup>4</sup> Once again I owe this idea to classroom lectures by Clowney.

apostles endeavored to persuade their hearers. People believed them not merely because they claimed to have direct divine authority but also because people "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (17:11).

The visions in Revelation and elsewhere illustrate nondiscursive processes. John saw visions, heard voices, and recorded what he saw and heard (Rev 22:8).

A possible instance of a mixed process, or creative-discerning process, is found in Acts 15. The apostles and elders settled a new, controversial issue partly by creatively appealing to explicit Scriptures (Acts 15:16-18), partly by discerning an analogy between the general issue and crucial incident with Peter (15:7-11).

The boundaries between these three types of processes are obviously fluid. Awareness of the basis for one's action is a matter of degree. One may be more or less aware of a few or many of the elements that contribute to one's action.

In the case of apostolic examples, the relevant discursive and nondiscursive processes are all inspired and divinely authoritative. On the other hand, in other cases the processes are not inspired. In fact they may be demonic. Demons use discursive processes in Matt 4:6; 2 Tim 2:25-26 and nondiscursive processes in Luke 4:34; Ezek 13:7; 12:24. In still other cases discursive and nondiscursive processes operate in the normal course of human experience. For example, discursive processes are at work in Abigail's argument in 1 Sam 25:28-31. Nondiscursive processes dominate when David gives himself over to grief (2 Sam 19:4) until Joab recalls him to his duty (19:5-8). In general there is no reason to believe that either discursive or nondiscursive processes are innately superior. Both may be inspired, in the case of apostolic examples, but both may also be noninspired.

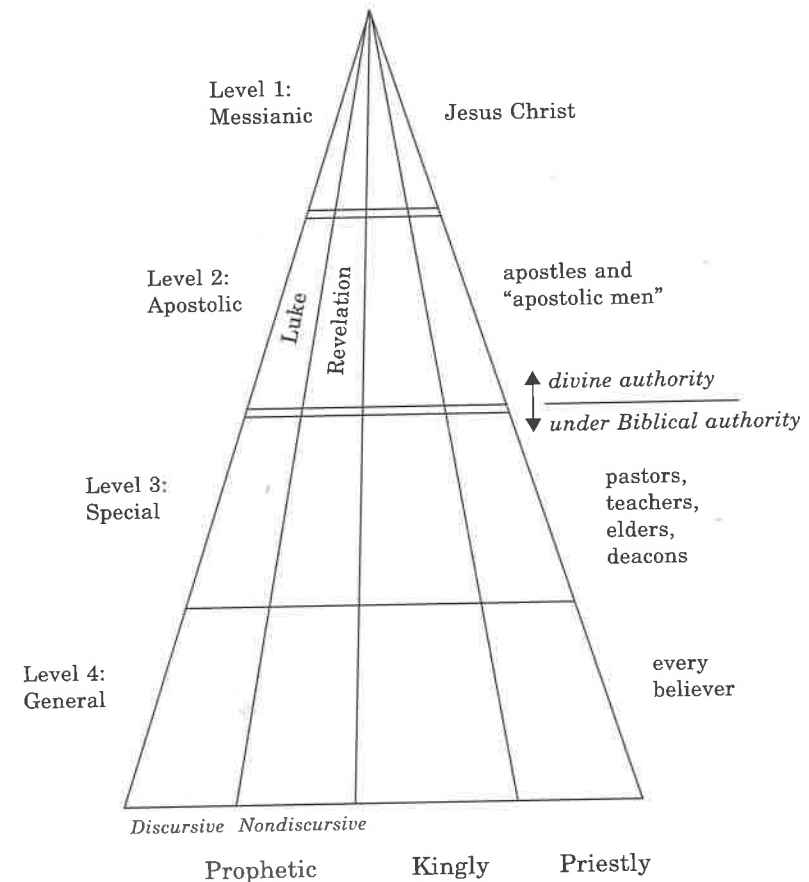
How do we fit modern Christian living into this picture? Diagram 1 suggests that we should think of modern gifts of the Spirit by analogy with gifts exercised by the apostles.<sup>5</sup> Hence in principle there is room for gifts that function as discursive processes, nondiscursive processes and mixed processes. Modern examples confirm this inference. Some people are very good at building explicit arguments from the Bible. Their gifts use discursive processes. Others, through long years of studying and digesting the Bible, and through the Holy Spirit who works the knowledge of the truth in their hearts, know what is right—but without being able at the moment to cite a particular verse justifying their conclusion. Their gifts involve nondiscursive processes. Others of course may typically be aware of some but not all Biblical sources for their action.

This diversity of processes holds in particular in the area of verbal gifts or gifts of knowledge and speech—that is, prophetic as opposed to kingly

<sup>5</sup> Note how J. Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 64-71, argues for analogy rather than pure identity between modern healing gifts and healing gifts exercised by the apostles. Hence at this point his position is similar to mine.

Diagram 2

DISCURSIVE AND NONDISCURSIVE GIFTS



and priestly gifts. Some people know and speak primarily on the basis of explicit reasoning from explicit passages of the Bible. Others know and speak on the basis of their own intuitive sense of what is in accord with the gospel (see diagram 2).

Note that within diagrams 1 and 2 modern gifts always belong to levels 3 and 4, which are called special gifts and general gifts. Modern gifts are all fallible. They are all dependent on Scripture and do not add to the Biblical canon. They are thus analogous to but not identical with apostolic gifts (level 2) and messianic gifts (level 1).

Let us consider some examples. On level 2, apostolic preaching involves predominantly discursive processes. Luke wrote the gospel of Luke

using discursive processes. Revelation gives us an example of nondiscursive processes.<sup>6</sup>

What goes on in modern times on levels 3 and 4? Discursive processes include modern preaching and informal Bible study and teaching. Nondiscursive processes include instances where Biblical ideas or verses come spontaneously to mind but without the recipient knowing just where or how they arose. Sometimes more striking instances occur. In a dream or a vision a person sees a woman in a simple white robe. She is walking through a muddy area. Some mud gets splattered on her robe. She comes to the gate of a palace. As she stands outside, she weeps with shame at her filthiness. A man comes and gives her a glorious bright gown. She puts it on and enters the palace with joy. Or a man has a dream where an angel is writing in a book. At the top of the page is the man's own name. Under it are all the evil things he has done and the evil thoughts he has entertained. A man appears with a bright face, his palms dripping with blood. He smears his hands over the page. A voice tells the angel to read what is on the page, but the angel answers: "I cannot, because it is covered with blood."

Is apostolic preaching genuinely analogous to modern preaching? Certainly apostolic preaching is inspired and unique. Modern preaching does not add to apostolic preaching but is wholly derivative from it. Hence we may perhaps hesitate to call the two analogous. Yet in some ways the two are unmistakably analogous. Preachers and commentators have always been willing to draw lessons from the examples of the apostles and even the example of Jesus, unique though these be.

Similarly we may ask whether Revelation is genuinely analogous to modern visions or dreams. The answer is like what we might say in the case of preaching. Revelation is inspired and unique. Modern impressions or visions, to be valid, must not add to the Bible but be wholly derivative from it. This derivative character is in fact evident in the two instances above, with the muddy robe and the smeared book. Both contain the Biblical teaching about pardon and righteousness in Christ, and both use themes and imagery derived from the Bible. The first is more general, while the second applies the truth of justification to a particular person. The second goes beyond the Bible only by way of its particular application, and hence everyone can recognize the legitimacy of its message. "What one person calls a 'vision' actually may have been a moving application by the Holy Spirit of the truth of Scripture to his life."<sup>7</sup>

In fact, in sermonic contexts we are comfortable with using texts analogically. Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6, unique though it is, becomes a basis for lessons about the calling of ministers of the Word. Peter's sermon in

<sup>6</sup> The level of messianic giftedness is more difficult to analyze because it involves mysteries in the relation between our Lord's true humanity and true deity. With respect to his humanity it seems that Jesus' ministry involved both discursive processes (John 10:35-36; Matt 22:31-32) and nondiscursive processes (17:27; Luke 10:18).

<sup>7</sup> O. P. Robertson, *The Final Word: A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1993) 84.

Acts 2 becomes a model for modern sermons. 1 Corinthians 12-14 becomes a source of principles for the exercise of modern spiritual gifts (even among those who think that most of the gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians have ceased).

People may sometimes be concerned about other distinctions. They may say, for example, that apostolic preaching and Revelation are fundamentally different because they involve new content, new revelation. By contrast, modern sermons and Biblically-based visions and intuitions contain a redigestion of old truth. But the differences here, though real, are subtle and easy to exaggerate. Apostolic teaching is to a remarkable extent based on the OT, the events of Christ's life, and the teaching of Jesus during his time on earth (including Luke 24:25-27, 44-49). Thus it is far from being absolutely new, though the message may have been new to many who first heard it. The book of Revelation weaves together a remarkable amount of thematic material from Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and other Biblical sources. The account in Luke and Acts, by recording earlier events, introduces nothing fundamentally new in addition to those events. Moreover divine authority has nothing to do with whether something is old or new. Deuteronomy is just as authoritative when it repeats earlier revelation as it is when it introduces something new.<sup>8</sup>

In the modern situation, preaching and visions and dreams, though old in one sense, may be new in another: They may well communicate ideas that are new to those who receive them. Moreover there are always new applications to new persons and new circumstances (as with the man's name on the blood-smeared book).

Then where is the decisive difference? All the modern processes are wholly derivative with respect to authority. Modern preaching possesses authority only insofar as it reiterates the message of Scripture. The same holds for modern intuitions, dreams, visions and all other nondiscursive processes.

Within this picture we must take seriously the sufficiency of the Bible and the fallibility of modern processes. This principle holds with respect to both discursive and nondiscursive processes. In the case of discursive processes, a preacher might preach either sound doctrine or heresy. An intuitive hunch or a dream (when interpreted) might be either true or false. In a modern context neither discursive nor nondiscursive processes can add more teaching beyond the Bible.

<sup>8</sup> A distinction between direct and indirect communication from God also proves fruitless. For what counts as direct? Did God give the visions of Revelation with or without using as a background John's own psychic composition and John's previous meditation on the OT in general and on Daniel and Ezekiel in particular? Did God give Peter the vision of Acts 10 with or without using Peter's hunger as a means? Did God give Peter the sermon in Acts 2:14-36 with or without using Peter's previous knowledge of the OT and Jesus' instruction in Luke 24:44-49? It is impossible to answer any of these questions definitively, nor is it necessary to answer them in order to appreciate the resulting speeches and acts of communication. Luke's use of the means of historical research does not devalue the product. Directness is simply not at issue in discussing the authority of a product.

To many people a modern vision or audition might seem more striking and more inexplicable than the discursive process of preaching. Hence, they reason, it is directly from the Holy Spirit and therefore infallible. But Deut 13:1-4; 2 Thess 2:9-11 contradict this inference. No modern spectacular experience, no matter how unusual or striking, can fundamentally add to the Bible. It may in fact be a counterfeit miracle (in the sense of 2 Thess 2:9-11). Or it may be a reiteration of Biblical truth, yet still contaminated by sinful human reception. Or it may contain information about the present situation (see below). Or it may be a confused mixture of truth and error. We test all such experience using the Bible as our infallible standard.

#### IV. DISTINCTIVE FOCI FOR CONTENT

We need one final distinction—namely, a distinction with respect to content rather than process. So far we have been talking about the process by which people come to say something. But we must also attend to the content of what they say. This content may attempt to reexpress the content of Scripture, or it may attempt to say something about the circumstances around us, or it may be a combination of both.

(1) People may speak with a focus on didactic content. They tell us what they think the Bible teaches or what they think God commands. Let us call the content of such speech teaching content.

(2) People may speak with a focus on circumstances. They tell us what is happening around them. Or they tell what has happened in the past or (if they predict something) what will happen. Let us call such speech circumstantial content.

(3) People may speak with a content that aims to combine both Biblical teaching and circumstantial information. People tell us how they think the Bible applies to the current situation. Let us call such speech applicatory content (see diagram 3).

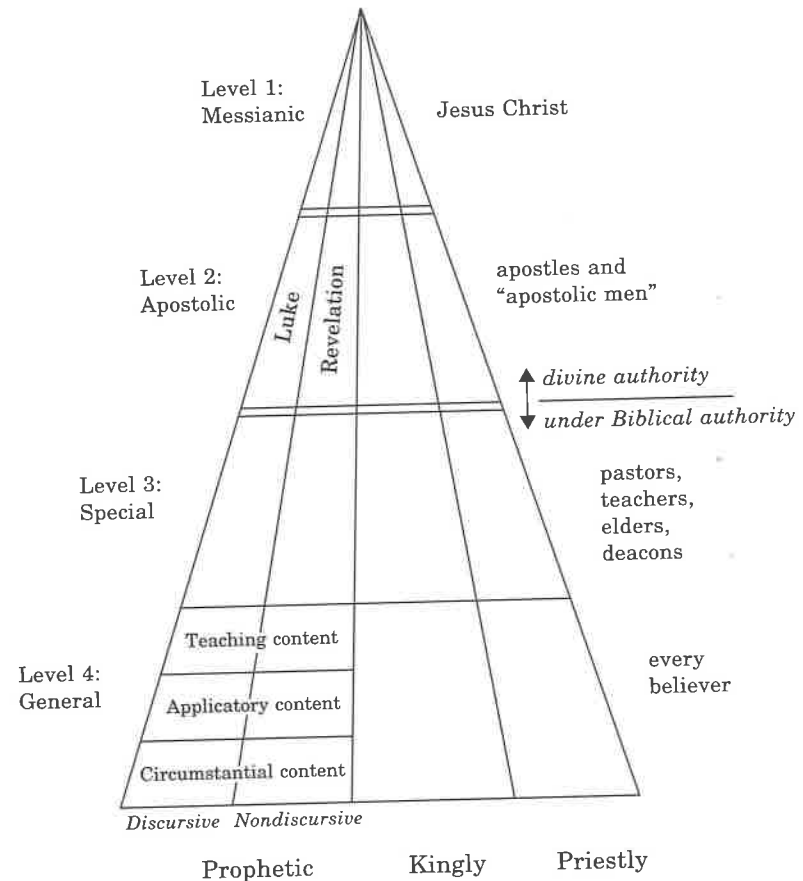
Within the NT, whatever Jesus and the apostles teach is the word of God. Thus it is teaching content, whether it focally speaks of God or of history or of their circumstances or of application. Then where does circumstantial content come in? It enters when we attempt to apply the Bible to our own modern circumstances. The NT commands us to apply this word in a discerning way in our own lives, where we continually confront new circumstances and new challenges (Eph 5:16-17; Rom 12:1-2). To accomplish this application we must inevitably deal with circumstantial and applicatory content.

We find this kind of thing illustrated many times in the Bible, in cases where historical narratives involve noninspired people or actions without explicit divine endorsement.

Consider first the account in 2 Chr 25:3-4: "After the kingdom was firmly in his [Amaziah's] control, he executed the officials who had murdered his father the king. Yet he did not put their sons to death, but acted in accordance with what is written in the Law, the Book of Moses, where the Lord commanded: 'Fathers shall not be put to death for their children,

Diagram 3

TEACHING CONTENT AND CIRCUMSTANTIAL CONTENT



nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sins.' In the actions described we find all three kinds of content. Consider first the principle in v. 4: "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sins." This principle quotes from Deut 24:16. It is obviously an instance of teaching content. Amaziah may have heard or recalled such teaching content before he made his decision.

Second, v. 3 implies that Amaziah had to find out the facts about the assassination of his father Joash. He or his officials had to make sure about enough of the facts of Joash's death if they were to follow due process of law (cf. Deut 19:15-21). This ascertaining of facts involved circumstantial content. In the end Amaziah did find out the truth about the

matter, but his knowledge of the truth or his statement of the truth was not divinely authoritative. It was simply ordinary knowledge.

Finally, the actual execution of the assassins involved applicatory content. In the execution Amaziah combined the teaching content from Deut 24:16, further teaching content about the penalty for murder (Gen 9:6), and circumstantial content about who was guilty in this particular instance.

The account of this whole affair in 2 Chr 25:3–4 is inspired and is thus an instance of teaching content. But the earlier events and the exchanges of factual information among Amaziah's officials were not inspired.

We may find any number of similar examples within historical narratives in the Bible. For example, 1 Kgs 1:43–48 is an inspired record of Jonathan's noninspired report of Solomon's coronation. Jonathan's speech, as distinguished from the inspired record of it in 1:43–48, involved circumstantial content. This report became the basis for the applicatory actions of Adonijah and his guests (1:49–51). Similarly Judg 20:29–32 looks like a case of applicatory content. God gave the command to the Israelites that they were to fight and promised them victory (20:28). But apparently the particulars of their plan of ambush did not arise from an explicit divine word. Rather, the commanders took into account circumstantial knowledge about military strategy and about what the Benjamites would probably expect.

Now the Bible is the foundation for exercising godly discernment about our circumstances. The teaching of the Bible is thus foundational in the Holy Spirit's work of teaching today. But there is reason to believe that the Holy Spirit as Creator and Redeemer is involved as well in the mundane aspects of our learning about ourselves and our circumstances (Job 32:8; Ps 94:10; Prov 1:2–7). From the broadest point of view the Spirit was instrumental in the processes leading Amaziah to the truth about his father's assassination. The Spirit gave Jonathan and Israelite military commanders whatever knowledge they had. As Prov 2:6 indicates: "The Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." This knowledge from the Lord includes the wisdom and insight concerning everyday life that the rest of the book of Proverbs champions. Everyday knowledge, as well as the explicit teaching of the Bible, comes from the Lord.

Today's circumstances do not of course possess any special authority. The Bible, by contrast, possesses divine authority. Hence on the issue of authority there is a great gulf between today's circumstances and the Bible's statements about circumstances of Biblical times. But in another sense there is an obvious relationship. People in Biblical times were people with problems, struggles and circumstances like ours. In some ways, then, their application of more general Biblical principles to their circumstances parallels our application of the Bible to our own new circumstances. In all cases the Lord is involved in instructing us. He gives us both knowledge of Biblical principles and knowledge of the particular circumstances to which we must respond.

## V. THE QUESTION OF MODERN CHARISMATIC GIFTS

We can now integrate modern charismatic gifts into our general framework. In both charismatic and noncharismatic circles, various kinds of gifts function through various processes. It is unnecessary to note them all. The more controversial kinds of gifts need our attention—in particular, the verbal gifts that charismatic groups classify as instances of a word of knowledge, a word of wisdom, prophecy, discerning spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues.

Those in the charismatic movement believe that the gifts of prophecy, discernment of spirits, and tongues continue in the Church today, while others argue that they ceased with the ministry of the apostles and the completion of special revelation.<sup>9</sup> I maintain that modern charismatic gifts are analogous to inspired apostolic gifts. Hence it may or may not be appropriate to call them by the same terms as those used in the NT. Rather than get bogged down in disputes about terminology, I move directly to a consideration of what the modern gifts actually do within the framework of diagram 3.

In terms of our earlier classification, all these controversial gifts are nondiscursive processes. They are controversial because their basis is more obscure and more private—that is, the basis is nondiscursive or intuitive.

By contrast, discursive processes are uncontroversial because they appeal to the Bible. Of course discursive processes are still fallible. Doctrinally sound preachers may preach the truth from Scripture. But heretical preachers may try to spread their heresy. And heretics may be all the more dangerous if they can give plausible arguments that appeal to Scripture to support their views. Hence discursive processes must still be checked by Scripture as the final standard. But everyone in Bible-believing circles is comfortable with such processes in principle because they acknowledge the need for expounding the Bible.

Nondiscursive processes give the problems. Some charismatics may think that because the basis is more personal, more private, more intuitive, it is also more directly the work of the Spirit and hence less subject to error than the other processes. But we have already observed that such thinking is clearly in error. The gospel of Luke is no less inspired than Revelation. Moreover even spectacular, seemingly miraculous cases may arise from counterfeit sources (2 Thess 2:9).

<sup>9</sup> The best argument for continuation is probably Grudem, *Gift*, building on W. A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in I Corinthians* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982). For cessation see Gaffin, *Perspectives*; R. F. White, "Gaffin and Grudem on Eph 2:20: In Defense of Gaffin's Cessationist Exegesis," *WTJ* 54 (1992) 303–320; "Richard Gaffin and Wayne Grudem on 1 Cor 13:10: A Comparison of Cessationist and Noncessationist Argumentation," *JETS* 35/2 (1992) 173–181. The literature on these questions is voluminous. But Grudem and Gaffin remain the most articulate spokesmen of the two main positions and may be taken as representative of a far broader circle.

Thus, according to our general theology of spiritual gifts, discursive and nondiscursive gifts simply stand alongside all other gifts with no particular superiority. Like all gifts they are to be checked for conformity to Scripture (1 Cor 14:37-38).

But should these nondiscursive cases even be called gifts of the Holy Spirit? We have already observed from Ps 94:10; Job 32:8; Prov 2:6 that the Holy Spirit as Creator and Sustainer of human life gives people all the knowledge they have. So in a broad sense these are gifts. Moreover, by labeling these works "gifts" we do not attribute infallibility to them. A gift in preaching, though it be genuine, does not give the modern preacher infallibility because the gift operates in the midst of human sin and bias. The same is true for nondiscursive gifts.

Many noncharismatics still have problems with nondiscursive processes because, they would claim, they are innately uncheckable. If no one can tell whether they conform to Scripture, then they threaten to disturb the exclusive role that the Bible plays in the Church's foundation.

But not every instance of nondiscursive processes is equally a problem. For the purpose of this article we temporarily set aside tongues because its content is not easy to analyze rationally and discursively. For the other verbal gifts we need to consider separately teaching content, circumstantial content and applicatory content.

Teaching content is like an extemporaneous sermon without a text. If the process is nondiscursive, the speaker is not consciously aware of texts on which the speech is based. But even if the speaker is not consciously aware of texts, the listeners may become conscious of texts that are relevant. If the content is Biblical, such texts do exist. If the content is not Biblical, then the speech is not to be believed. Hence this type of content is testable. Anyone who knows the Bible well, or knows the gospel, can see whether the message matches what he knows. In my own personal experience such testing is not hard. Many so-called "prophecies" in charismatic circles string together Biblical phraseology. It is not too hard to see their generally Biblical character.

It is of course a little easier to evaluate a textually-based sermon. The text is explicit, and the listeners have immediate access to it. They can compare the text with what the preacher says. But there are still difficulties. A clever heretic may use a text plausibly. And a nonheretical preacher may find himself drifting away from the text by design or on the spur of the moment. Discernment is therefore necessary in evaluating teaching content, no matter whether the process involved was discursive or nondiscursive.

Note also that people differ in the way they exercise discernment. For some people discernment may usually be discursive. In their minds they remember a Biblical text that conforms with what the preacher says or else contradicts it. Other people may discern nondiscursively. They feel that what the preacher is saying is right or wrong. They cannot point to a specific text. But they just know, perhaps on the basis of having assimilated and digested a large amount of the Bible. Their digested knowledge now works in their hearts subconsciously to give them discernment. The

thought spontaneously rises in their mind: "Something is wrong with this message."

Since the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of believers, we may also describe all these processes as Spirit-worked. Of course the Holy Spirit works in ways we cannot fathom. But he also works through means, such as our knowledge of Scripture, a knowledge that he himself has produced (1 Cor 2:10-16). From the human side people use primarily discursive or nondiscursive processes. But this human description does not contradict the fact that the Spirit is working. (Again, think of the example of the gospel of Luke and the book of Revelation.)

Different types of people help one another. Occasionally a person who discerns discursively may not immediately be able to think of a relevant Biblical text to use in evaluating a message. But someone else feels nondiscursively that something is wrong. Then the person with discursive discernment takes more time, and finally a text does come to mind that helps judge the truth of the speaker's message.

#### VI. CIRCUMSTANTIAL CONTENT RECEIVED THROUGH NONDISCURSIVE PROCESSES

So far we have discussed teaching content. Let us now consider the second kind of content—namely, circumstantial content. In this category we have statements like the following. In an American church someone says, "I feel that our sister church in Shanghai is spiritually struggling and undergoing attack." During a sermon Charles H. Spurgeon "pointed to the gallery and said, 'Young man, the gloves in your pocket are not paid for.'"<sup>10</sup> On another occasion Spurgeon said, "There is a man sitting there who is a shoemaker; he keeps his shop open on Sundays; it was open last Sabbath morning. He took ninepence, and there was fourpence profit on it: his soul is sold to Satan for fourpence!"<sup>11</sup> A woman in Switzerland saw a vision of a lecture hall in Essex, in which Os Guinness was about to lecture. A strange girl was about to disrupt the meeting.<sup>12</sup> All these are cases of circumstantial content obtained through nondiscursive processes.

This kind of content undoubtedly causes the most difficulty. But the difficulties diminish if we realize that this information is not very different in content from information obtained through obvious channels. For example, in principle the church in Shanghai might have been able to put in a long-distance phone call to the brothers and sisters in the United States. Spurgeon could have obtained the information (but did not) from the person who stole the gloves or from the person who opened his shop on Sunday. Os Guinness could have put in a long-distance call to the woman in Switzerland. The kind of information involved is not striking. What is striking is that the information came through nondiscursive processes. There was no obvious long-distance call or other scientifically

<sup>10</sup> E. W. Bacon, *Spurgeon: Heir of the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 156.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> O. Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973) 299.



analyzable means that could account for how the information came to the recipient.

In terms of diagram 3, such information is a product of spiritual processes operating on the level of the ordinary believer (level 4), or conceivably on the level of special gifts (level 3). If the canon is complete, there is no way that this information belongs on level 1 or level 2. Moreover there is no practical reason why the information needs to belong to level 1 or level 2. What matters is that the recipients received information, not that the information had special status. Hence I would argue that information of this kind belongs to the same broad category as information received through long-distance telephone calls, newspaper news and direct observation. It is simply information about the world, not more, not less. In principle it is no more a threat to the sufficiency of Scripture than is information about whether I brushed my teeth after breakfast.<sup>13</sup>

I would guess that people have gotten into trouble over nondiscursive processes because of the lack of obvious means. In cases involving nondiscursive processes, there was no long-distance call. Thus, the reasoning goes, the person in question must have received the information directly from God. Hence the information must be directly inspired and carry full divine authority. This last conclusion creates the most painful difficulty. For if the conclusion is true, the information received appears to compete with the authority of the Bible. Cessationists feel that they must rule out this type of process completely in order to protect the sufficiency and exclusivity of Biblical authority. Noncessationists, by contrast, feel pressure to submit to such information uncritically, contrary to the fallible character of modern sources.

Both sides need to cool down. The crucial error is to confuse involvement of God with lack of involvement of human creatureliness and human sin, and in addition to confuse involvement of God with full divine authority in the product. God is in a sense directly involved in the growth of grass and blowing breezes: "He makes grass grow for the cattle" (Ps 104:14). But growing grass is not inspired. Moreover, even if people are not consciously aware of any sources for their thoughts or words or visions, there still are such sources and influences from aspects of their personality. Leaders in charismatic circles are well aware that people may speak prophecies or tongues in the flesh—that is, leaders know that some nondiscursive processes are psychologically motivated.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Along with many others, Robertson is quite rightly concerned about any extra words claiming to be "a word from the Lord," claiming to specify "his will for their lives" (*Final Word* 88–95, esp. p. 89). He points out how unstable, confusing and oppressive such claims can become. But my distinction between teaching content and circumstantial content addresses the problem: Teaching content either reiterates Scripture or is invalid (thus no additions to Scripture). Circumstantial content, properly understood, is not "a word from the Lord" at all, in the sense of being instruction about his will, but is simply circumstantial information. If I announce that I brushed my teeth I do not thereby proclaim a "word from the Lord" expressing his (preceptive) will.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. C. Brumback, *What Meaneth This?* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1947) 259; K. McDonnell, *Charismatic Renewal and the Churches* (New York: Seabury, 1976) 145–146.

Dreams are a good example. Most westerners today regard most dreams as basically a product of the unconscious or of uncontrolled imagination. Presumably there were many mundane, ordinary dreams in the world of NT times as well. But some dreams were revelatory (Matt 1:20–24). Acts 10:10 suggests that God may use a normal human experience such as hunger as one means through which he brings about an appropriate vision or dream.

Analogously in modern times we may postulate that a dream may be simultaneously a product of certain personal psychological predispositions and a means used by God to bring to a person's attention some kind of circumstantial content. For example, suppose that, just before going to bed, Sally and her husband talk about their Aunt Emma, who is driving a considerable distance to and from a special meeting that night. That very night Sally has an unusually powerful, striking dream in which Aunt Emma suddenly dies in a car accident. Sally then wakes up. She decides to pray for Aunt Emma and those close to her. Then she goes back to sleep. The next day she hears that Aunt Emma was in an accident the same night on which Sally prayed. The car was badly damaged, but fortunately Aunt Emma was not injured. The dream was not infallible or an addition to the Bible. Rather, the dream was a fallible psychological experience that God used to bring Sally to pray at a crucial time.

The crucial example of Luke and the book of Revelation comes back to instruct us. There is no intrinsically superior spirituality belonging to either discursive processes (Luke) or nondiscursive processes (Revelation). In the cases where the Holy Spirit produced the canon, both kinds of processes were inspired. But in other cases both kinds of processes may be noninspired. Both may in principle be influenced by demons (2 Tim 2:24–26; Luke 8:32; Acts 16:17–18). Both may be of fallible and confused character, in accordance with the general fallibility of human beings. Since inspiration has ceased with the completion of the canon, modern sources are all fallible.

Suppose, then, that we grant that modern nondiscursive processes are all fallible. They are no threat in principle to the unique authority of the Bible. Yet many people may still find some difficulty in knowing how to deal with them. How can the validity of the content be checked out? If we give any credence to nondiscursive processes, will they not in practice be uncritically received because they cannot be directly checked by Scripture?

We have seen that when the content is teaching content or doctrinally oriented content, the listeners can check the content by comparing it with Scripture. But how can circumstantial content be checked out? Suppose someone claims through nondiscursive processes that a young man has not paid for his gloves. Are we to believe the claim or not?

Situations like these are not so difficult as we might suppose. Many times it does not much matter what we believe. We are free to remain in doubt. And we are well advised to remain in doubt, by virtue of the fallibility of all modern nondiscursive processes. In the cases from the life of Spurgeon, the congregation gets an illustration of the general lesson that

all the assembled people are being addressed by God concerning their particular needs and sins. If Spurgeon is right and there is a young man with stolen gloves, the young man knows it and gets addressed very particularly. If Spurgeon is wrong (which he may be in his fallibility) there is no one who is so addressed, but the general lesson for the whole congregation remains.

Moreover we can pray for a situation without knowing for certain whether the situation is exactly what we think it is. We can pray for the young man, knowing that God knows what the situation actually is. We can pray for the sister church in Shanghai.

Of course the dangers of abuse are never far away. Spurgeon spoke to a large congregation, so that it would presumably be impossible for people to know exactly whom Spurgeon had in mind. Even he may not have known the individual. But if a speaker were to claim that a particular person has sinned, the result may be slander, which is clearly anti-Biblical (Prov 10:18; Col 3:8; 1 Pet 2:1; etc.). The speaker would then need to be rebuked.

Some people may still feel some discomfort about their uncertainty. They may reason as follows. When we get a long-distance call from Shanghai we know what is happening there. But when we have a nondiscursive process we do not know for sure what is happening. So how are we supposed to respond?

But in actuality we are accustomed in many types of situations to respond to doubtful information. After all, a long-distance call is not infallible either. There may be static on the line. The person on the other end of the line may have misunderstood the situation in Shanghai. Or he may be lying about the situation. Or he may have gone insane. Or the voice we hear may be faked by an impersonator. In spite of these problems of fallibility, it is possible to respond properly to a long-distance call.

Consider another angle. If the person on the other end of a telephone call has sometimes proved unreliable in the past, we discount what he says to some degree. Likewise if someone's nondiscursive processes have been unreliable, we discount what he says in proportion to his unreliability. If we have no previous experience with a person's nondiscursive processes, we discount what he says in more or less the way we would do with any apparently well-meaning stranger. Much of this practice of estimating reliability is common in all human relationships. We are really not dealing with something that has no precedent in human experience.

#### VII. PREDICTIONS

There are still a few kinds of circumstantial content that need special attention. One of these is the area of prediction. What if someone predicts the time when Christ will come back? Then we can safely ignore the prediction, because it contradicts Scripture (Mark 13:32-37; Acts 1:7). We should admonish the person doing the predicting, using as our basis the Biblical warnings against date setting.

But now take another case. What if someone says that part of California will sink into the sea by such-and-such a date? If we live in California, should we pack our bags and leave? The first rule in such cases must be, as always, to remember that all modern human prediction is fallible. What do we do with weather predictions or economic forecasts? We pay some attention to them, but we know that they often prove wrong, or partly wrong and partly right.

Some people may object that weather predictions and economic predictions are not really a parallel case because they are discursive rather than nondiscursive in character. Certainly the people who make the predictions do so by inference. But ordinary people who judge the credibility of the predictions almost never know the details of modern meteorological or economic theories, nor do they know the details of the data on which the theories operate in order to yield a specific forecast. In actual practice we judge credibility by common human means. Has this sort of thing proved reliable in the past? Has the person shown himself to be a reliable person in this area? Is this prediction the kind of thing it seems likely that God would do?

Our general conclusion remains the same. Undoubtedly the Holy Spirit can work through nondiscursive processes to produce human predictions. He can also work through discursive processes to produce human predictions. Neither is intrinsically more spiritual than the other, and neither is intrinsically more fallible than the other. Neither kind of prediction is an extra divine word demanding submissive believing response but is simply putative information about future circumstances, to be evaluated as we would evaluate any other prediction.

Once we realize that predictions based on nondiscursive processes are not in some special divine category and are just as fallible as predictions based on discursive processes, we are ready to practice sanity. We neither totally reject nor credulously accept these predictions.

#### VIII. COMMANDS

Now what about instances involving commands? R. C. Sproul relates an incident when thoughts went sharply through his head: "Go throughout the world and preach the Gospel to every living creature. . . . Take Vesta [R. C.'s future wife] with you."<sup>15</sup> Even more controversial are cases when one human being issues a command to someone else: Abe says to Bill, "The Lord says that you are to go and become a missionary in Mozambique."

To begin with, the language "The Lord says" is inappropriate, confusing and dangerous. It is likely to be understood as a claim for infallible revelation. Abe should rather say, "I feel that the Lord is laying it on my heart that you should go and become a missionary in Mozambique."<sup>16</sup> Even without the dangerous introduction, a command like this one seems

<sup>15</sup> R. C. Sproul, "Striking a Chord in the Heart of the Believer," *Table Talk* 14/11 (November 1990) 13.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Grudem, *Gift* 260.

to some people to threaten the sufficiency of Biblical revelation. Psalm 119:1 says, "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord." To be blameless, all that is needed is to "walk according to the law of the Lord." No further rules or commands are necessary. The "law of the Lord" gives complete instruction in righteousness. Similarly 2 Tim 3:16-17 indicates that Scripture is sufficient "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Any command that adds to the Bible, whether claiming infallibility or not, is illicit (Deut 4:2).

In addition, commands like Abe's often create excruciating practical problems. Suppose that Abe tells Bill to go as a missionary to Mozambique. But Bill honestly does not have any intuitive impulse of his own to go to Mozambique. Bill is caught. If he does not go, he feels guilty for disobeying something that may be the Lord's will. If he does go, he feels unhappy because he does not really want to go and fears that his going was not really the Lord's will.

Moreover charismatic groups have sometimes had sad experiences where manipulative people have used commands like these to enforce slavish obedience to their whims. Pushy people have used commands to achieve selfish personal purposes. Understandably, some leaders have banned this form of speech entirely. "This is not what prophecy is about," they say.

Certainly the practical dangers, as well as the dangers of infringing on the sufficiency of Scripture, urge us to use caution and even a certain amount of suspicion about extra-Biblical commands. But apparently extra-Biblical commands sometimes deserve closer inspection. In some cases they may not really be additions to Scripture but rather applications of Scripture. They fall into the area that I call applicatory content. Consider, for instance, the idea that came to R. C. Sproul: "Go throughout the world and preach the Gospel to every living creature." The language is similar to Mark 16:15. Text-critical problems with the ending of Mark prevent us from being absolutely certain that Mark 16:15 is part of the autograph of Mark, but the general idea is Biblical, as is shown in Matt 28:19. We do not, then, have an addition to the Bible in the form of an odd, unheard-of demand. Rather, we have a Biblical command applied to R. C. Sproul. To make sure that the application is correct, we would of course have to have some information about Sproul as well: Does he have gifts and spiritual qualifications to become an official preacher of the Word? But given some circumstantial content about Sproul, the application is a good one.

In general, applications use both Biblical commandments and information about the world. Only with some degree of information about the world can we ascertain that the application is appropriate.

Sometimes human mistakes may be made even when both a Biblical command and valid circumstantial content are available. Consider Acts 21:4: "Through the Spirit they [disciples at Tyre] urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." This verse is difficult on any reckoning. But perhaps what happened was as follows. "Through the Spirit" the disciples at Tyre ob-

tained information about what was going to happen to Paul in Jerusalem. (Note Acts 20:23: "In every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.") This information was received through nondiscursive processes. The disciples were also familiar with Biblical commandments concerning protection of human life (e.g. Exod 20:13) and concerning prudence (Prov 22:3; etc.). When they put together the Biblical norms with information about the world, they inferred that Paul should not go. But the inference was incorrect because of the special calling of Paul (Acts 20:22-24; 21:14).

When people give unusual commands today, these commands may sometimes be a combination of Biblical norms with circumstantial content. For example, the command "Preach the gospel" addressed to R. C. Sproul combines the Biblical norm in Matt 28:19 with circumstantial content about the gifts of Sproul. Sometimes both the Biblical norms and the circumstantial content may come from nondiscursive processes. Then the people who issue a command are unable consciously to specify where the command comes from. It is simply a command with nondiscursive origin. It is not infallible, of course, but it may still in some cases be a command that is actually a valid application of Biblical norms.

Hence there is an undeniable possibility that valid commands may issue from nondiscursive processes. But, as we have already observed, caution must be used in assessing such commands. The wisdom of others, both wisdom about the Bible and wisdom about the situation and the persons involved, must be used to judge what response is appropriate. And it should be stressed that we know that the Lord desires service from our hearts (2 Cor 9:7), not slavish obedience to commands that are burdensome or oppressive (Matt 11:28-30; 1 John 5:3). At root, the will of the Lord is always clear: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt 22:37-39). People must learn to devote all their energy to obeying the clear will of the Lord. And in the process what is less clear (for example, going to Mozambique) will fall in place.

#### IX. WELCOMING SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Let us return to the main point. In our day God may work both through discursive processes and nondiscursive processes. In the time of the apostles both kinds of processes occurred in inspired form. In our time the canon of Scripture is complete and inspiration has ceased. Modern processes are fallible. But they are analogous to the processes that occurred among the apostles. In understanding modern spiritual gifts we are to take our clue from what happened in apostolic times.

What, then, are we to do about modern spiritual gifts? Modern gifts include both discursive gifts (e.g. the gift of teaching), and nondiscursive gifts (e.g. people who can give an apt word spontaneously [Col 4:6]). The

possibility of both kinds of gifts can be inferred from the analogous distribution of different kinds of gifts in the time of the apostles. Moreover Christ and the Holy Spirit are the source of all gifts (Eph 4:7, 11; cf. 1 Cor 12:11). It is they, not we, who decide when to use discursive and nondiscursive processes as the Holy Spirit works.

In response, we are to welcome spiritual gifts of all kinds, honor them and receive them (12:14–26). We are especially to pursue love (1 Corinthians 13) and those gifts that build up the Church (1 Corinthians 14). At the same time we are to be discriminating (1 Thess 5:21–22). We are to exercise discernment. Modern manifestations are always fallible. Everything is to be evaluated on the basis of Scripture, to which nothing is to be added (Deut 4:2; Rev 22:18–19).

There are lessons here both for charismatics and for noncharismatics. Some charismatics need to become more explicit about the fallible, mixed character of nondiscursive gifts. They need to learn to value discursive gifts. Instead they have up till now indirectly said “I don’t need you” (1 Cor 12:21) to discursive gifts because, supposedly, these gifts are less spiritual than nondiscursive gifts.<sup>17</sup>

Conversely, some noncharismatics need to learn to value nondiscursive gifts. Instead they have subtly to say, “I don’t need you.” Their basis, supposedly, is that nondiscursive gifts ceased with the completion of the canon of Scripture. What they have actually shown is merely that inspired nondiscursive gifts ceased with the completion of the canon.<sup>18</sup>

We also need to become clear about one point in diagram 3 where analogy breaks down—namely, with regard to the crucial distinction between teaching content and circumstantial content. The inspired content in the Bible is, according to my definition, all teaching content. By contrast, in our modern settings we wrestle with both teaching content and circumstantial content. Hence there is no strict apostolic analogue for modern circumstantial content. To be sure, the apostles and everyone else in the Bible had to confront challenges to apply general Biblical principles to their particular circumstances. But the applications that the apostles made were themselves inspired and thus comprise part of the divine Biblical norm. Apostolically authorized information about circumstances, however trivial it may look (2 Tim 4:13), is divinely authoritative and permanently instructive to the Church. In this respect it belongs on the divine side, while our modern circumstantial information belongs to the created side to which the divine word is to be applied. The relation between our modern teaching content and modern circumstantial content is not symmet-

<sup>17</sup> Such lessons are included in the tenor of what is said in *ibid.* 253–263.

<sup>18</sup> Thus e.g. Gaffin cautiously opens a door to modern nondiscursive gifts in *Perspectives* 120: “Often, too, what is seen as prophecy is actually a spontaneous Spirit-worked application of Scripture, a more or less sudden grasp of the bearing that biblical teaching has on a particular situation or problem. All Christians need to be open to these more spontaneous workings of the Spirit.” Gaffin here speaks of what I have classified as teaching content derived through nondiscursive processes. Robertson allows for similar phenomena in *Final Word* 84.

rical or balanced. Rather, the modern teaching content is authoritative insofar as it reexpresses Scripture. Modern circumstantial content is not ecclesiastically authoritative at all, no matter how truthful it may be.

In our day God may alert us to circumstantial content through both discursive and nondiscursive means. We should be appreciative of all that God does in this area through whatever means. But the lack of symmetry between teaching content and circumstantial content indicates that teaching content, based on the Bible, must alone function with authority and must enjoy preeminence as an expression of the will of God for his people.

#### X. THE DEBATE ABOUT THE CESSATION OF PROPHECY

Now let us look for a moment at a tangled debate. People debate about whether “prophecy” in the NT and the early Church was divinely inspired and infallible. Did it possess full divine authority? Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., says that it was inspired.<sup>19</sup> Wayne A. Grudem argues that it was not.<sup>20</sup> Many people believe that the outcome of this debate is crucial for the future of the charismatic movement. But actually the outcome of the debate makes very little practical difference today.

Suppose Gaffin is right. Then prophecy ceased with the completion of the apostolic era and the completion of the canon of Scripture. Modern phenomena are fallible and hence are not identical with NT prophecy. But modern nondiscursive processes with teaching content are analogous to prophecy, just as modern preaching is analogous to apostolic preaching. Hence the general principles concerning spiritual gifts, as articulated in 1 Corinthians 12–14 and elsewhere, are still applicable. What charismatics call prophecy is not really the prophecy mentioned in the NT. Rather, it is a fallible analogue. It is really a spiritual gift for speaking fallibly through nondiscursive processes. It contrasts with preaching, which is a spiritual gift for speaking fallibly through discursive processes.

Modern nondiscursive processes with circumstantial content are in a sense not really analogous to inspired Biblical prophecy. But they can function positively in the service of the Spirit, just as does circumstantial content through discursive processes.

On the other hand, suppose that Grudem is right. Then prophecy continues. But such prophecy is fallible. It is not identical with the inspired prophecy of the OT. It is in fact a spiritual gift for speaking fallibly through nondiscursive processes. If the content is Biblical, its authority derives from the Bible. If the content is circumstantial, it is not an addition to the Bible (not divinely authoritative). Hence it is just information and has no special authority. Hence Grudem ends up with substantially the same practical conclusions as does Gaffin.

<sup>19</sup> Gaffin, *Perspectives*.

<sup>20</sup> Grudem, *Gifts*.

Thus there is no need for Gaffin and Grudem to disagree about the modern phenomena. They disagree only about the label given to the phenomena ("not-prophecy" versus "prophecy") and about whether the NT phenomena were identical or merely analogous to the modern phenomena.

Both Gaffin and Grudem already acknowledge the fallibility of the modern phenomena. Gaffin needs only to take the additional step of integrating the modern phenomena into a theology of spiritual gifts. Given this theological integration, we find that there is an analogical justification for the use of these gifts in the Church today.

Grudem, on the other hand, needs only to clarify the status of prophecy. Prophecy, he says, is fallible but still revelatory. It still derives from God and still is important for the well-being of the Church. Gaffin and many others find this sort of description difficult to grasp or classify. How can something be revelatory and still not compete with the sufficiency of Scripture? I explain how, partly by distinguishing teaching content from circumstantial content. Teaching content must not add to Scripture but can only rephrase what is already there in Scripture. Circumstantial content has the same status as information received through a long-distance telephone call—that is, it has no special claim to authority. It is therefore obvious that neither type of content threatens the sufficiency of Scripture.

If charismatics and noncharismatics could agree on these points, I think that the debate on modern spiritual gifts would be largely over. But there are practical adjustments. People who value nondiscursive gifts have tended to migrate into charismatic circles, where nondiscursive gifts are prized. People who value discursive gifts have migrated into non-charismatic circles, where discursive gifts are prized. Each group tends to prize only people of its own kind. We all need to learn again from 1 Corinthians 12 the importance of every gift, including those with which we have yet to become comfortable.

We cannot dictate beforehand that discursive gifts or nondiscursive gifts must always be dominant, that they must be the outstanding characteristic of every Christian community. For the Lord "gives them [gifts] to each one, just as he determines," not as we determine (1 Cor 12:11). On the other hand, we can be confident that the Lord purposes to rule and guide his Church through the complete Scriptures. He adds no extra divinely authoritative claims. Hence a natural preeminence belongs to teaching content, whose authority derives from Scripture (cf. Eph 4:11).

#### XI. HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS

The conclusions to which we have come are not really so novel when we compare them with the history of the Church. The Holy Spirit has used both discursive and nondiscursive processes through the course of Church history. Christians have often been able to acknowledge both kinds of processes in a balanced way, though they also had to struggle with aberrations.

Reformed tradition may serve as a suitable example. This tradition is typically associated with cessationist theology. Reformed writers repeatedly stress the completeness and sufficiency of Scripture. They show an appreciation for discursive processes for deriving conclusions from Scripture. Yet we also find testimony to extraordinary works of the Spirit of a nondiscursive kind. The following may serve as examples.

First, the words of Samuel Rutherford are of special interest because he was one of the people involved in drawing up the Westminster Standards. He says:

There is a 3 revelation [a third kind of revelation, in addition to canonical revelation and to the internal testimony of the Spirit giving assurance] of some particular men, who have forefold [*sic*] things to come even since the ceasing of the Canon of the word, as Iohn Husse, Wickeliefe, Luther, have foretold things to come, and they certainly fell out, and in our nation of Scotland, M. George Wishart foretold that Cardinall Beaton should not come out alive at the Gates of the Castle of St. Andrewes, but that he should dye a shamefull death, and he was hanged over the wisdom that he did look out at, when he saw the man of God burnt, M. Knox prophecied of the hanging of the Lord of Grange, M. Ioh. Davidson uttered prophecies, knowne to many of the kingdome, diverse Holy and mortified preachers in England have done the like: no Familists, or Antinomians, no David George, nor H. Nicholas, no man ever of that Gang, Randel or Wheelwright, or Den, or any other, that ever I heard of, being once engaged in the Familisticall way, ever did utter any but the fourth sort [satanic prophecies] of lying and false inspirations: Mrs Hutchison, said she should be delivered from the Court of Boston miraculously as Daniel from the Lyons, which proved false, Becold prophecied of the deliverance of the Towne of Munster which was delivered to their enemies, and he and his Prophet were tortured and hanged, David George prophecied of the raising [p. 43] of himselfe from the dead, which was never fulfilled, now the differences between the third and fourth [satanic] revelations, I place in these. 1 These worthy reformers did tye no man to beleve their prophecies as scriptures, we are to give faith, to the predictions of Prophets and Apostles, foretelling facts to come, as to the very word of God, they never gave themselves out as organs immediately inspired by the Holy Ghost, as the Prophets doe, and as Paul did Rom. 11. prophecying of the calling of the Jewes, and Ioh. Revel. 1.10. and through the whole booke; yea they never denounced Iudgement against those that belevee not their predictions, of these particular events and facts as they are such particular events & facts, as the Prophets and Apostles did. But Mrs. Hutchison said Rise, Reigne, pag. 61 art. 27. That her particular revelations about future events, Were as infallible as any scripture, and that shee is bound as much to believe them as the Scripture, for the same Holy Ghost is author of both, . . . [p. 44] 2 The events revealed to Godly and sound witnesses of Christ are not contrary to the word: But Becold, Iohn Mathie, and Ioh. Schykerus (who kild his brother for no fault) and other Enthysiasts of that murdering Spirit Sathan who killed innocent men, expresly against the fixt command. Thou shalt not Kill, and taught the Boures of Germany to rise and kill all lawfull Magistrates, because they were no Magistrates; upon the pretence of the Impulsions and Inspirations of the Holy Ghost, were acted by inspirations against the word of God; All that the Godly reformers

foretold of the tragical ends of the proclaimed enemies of the Gospell, they were not actors themselves in murdering these enemies of God, nor would M Wishart command or approve that Norman and Ioh. Leslyes should kill the Cardinall Beaton, as they did. 2 [sic; should be 3] They had a generall rule going along that Evill shall hunt the wicked man: onely a secret harmesse, but an extraordinary strong impulsion, of a Scripture-spirit leading them, carried them to apply a generall rule of divine justice, in their predictions, to particular Godlesse men, they themselves onely being foretellers not copartners of the act.<sup>21</sup>

In the life of John Flavel appears the following account:

The night before he [Flavel] embarked . . . , he had the following premonition by a dream; he thought he was on board the ship, and that a storm arose which exceedingly terrified the passengers, during their consternation there sat writing at the table a person of admirable sagacity and gravity, who had a child in a cradle by him that was very froward; he thought he saw the father take up a little whip, and give the child a lash, saying, *Child, be quiet, I will discipline, but not hurt thee*. Upon this Mr. Flavel awaked, and musing on his dream, he concluded, that he should meet with some trouble in his passage: his friends being at dinner with him, assured him of a pleasant passage, because the wind and weather were very fair; Mr. Flavel replied, *That he was not of their mind, but expected much trouble because of his dream*, adding, *that when he had such representations made to him in his sleep, they seldom or never failed*.

Accordingly, when they were advanced within five leagues of Portland in their voyage, they were overtaken by a dreadful tempest.<sup>22</sup>

John Howie cites a number of instances from the Scotland Covenanters John Welch and Robert Bruce:

After writing several times to him, to suppress the profanation of the Lord's day at his house, which he slighted, not loving to be called a puritan, Welch came one day to his gate, and, calling him out, told him that he had a message from God to show him; because he had slighted the advice given him from the Lord, and would not restrain the profanation of the Lord's day committed in his bounds, therefore the Lord would cast him out of his house, and none of his posterity should enjoy it. This accordingly came to pass; for although he was in a good external situation at this time, yet henceforth all things went against him, until he was obliged to sell his estate; and when giving the purchaser possession thereof, he told his wife and children that he had found Welch a true prophet.<sup>23</sup>

[Welch] told her [his wife] that he had been wrestling with the Lord for Scotland, and found there was a sad time at hand, but that the Lord would

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Rutherford [sic], *A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist. Opening the Secrets of Familisme and Antinomianisme in the Antichristian Doctrine of John Saltmarsh, and Will. Del, the Present Preachers of the Army now in England, and of Robert Town, Tob. Crisp, H. Denne, Eaton, and Others* . . . (London: Andrew Crooke, 1648), part I, chap. 7, pp. 42-44.

<sup>22</sup> "The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel," *The Works of John Flavel* (London: Banner of Truth, 1968) 1.viii.

<sup>23</sup> J. Howie, *The Scots Worthies* (rev. ed.; Edinburgh/London: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1902) 123.

be gracious to a remnant. This was about the time when bishops first overspread the land, and corrupted the Church.<sup>24</sup>

One day two travelling merchants, each with a pack of cloth upon a horse, came to the town desiring entrance, that they might sell their goods, producing a pass from the magistrates of the town from whence they came, which was at that time sound and free [from plague]. Notwithstanding all this, the sentinels stopped them till the magistrates were called, and when they came they would do nothing without their minister's advice; so John Welch was called, and his opinion asked. He demurred, and putting off his hat, with his eyes towards heaven for a pretty space, though he uttered no audible words, yet he continued in a praying posture, and after a little space told the magistrates that they would do well to discharge these travellers their town, affirming, with great asseveration, that the plague was in these packs. So the magistrates commanded them to be gone, and they went to Cumnock, a town about twenty miles distant, and there sold their goods, which kindled such an infection in that place, that the living were hardly able to bury their dead. This made the people begin to think of Mr Welch as an oracle.<sup>25</sup>

He [Welch] told them [two citizens of Edinburgh] that they had in their town two great ministers, who were no great friends to Christ's cause presently in controversy, but, it should be seen, the world should never hear of their repentance. The two men were Mr Patrick Galloway and Mr John Hall, and, accordingly, it came to pass; for Patrick Galloway died suddenly, and John Hall, being at that time in Leith, and his servant woman having left him alone in his house while she went to market, he was found dead at her return.<sup>26</sup>

One night sitting at supper with Lord Ochiltree, he [Welch] entertained the company with godly and edifying discourse, as his manner was, which was well received by them all, except a debauched Popish young gentleman, who sometimes laughed, and sometimes mocked and made wry faces. Thereupon Mr Welch brake out into a sad abrupt charge upon all the company to be silent, and observe the work of the Lord upon that mocker, which they should presently behold; upon which the profane wretch sunk down and died beneath the table, to the great astonishment of all the company.<sup>27</sup>

The first time that Welch saw his [Lord Ochiltree's] face after his return from Court, he asked him what he had done with his petition. His Lordship said that he had presented it to the King, but that the King was in so great a rage against the ministers at that time, he believed it had been forgotten, for he had got no answer. "Nay," said Welch to him, "my Lord, you should not lie to God, and to me; for I know you never delivered it, though I warned you to take heed not to undertake it except you would perform it; but because you have dealt so unfaithfully, remember God shall take from you both estate and honours, and give them to your neighbour in your own time." This accordingly came to pass, for both his estate and honours were in his own

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 124.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 124-125.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 130.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

time translated to James Stuart, son of Captain James, who was indeed a cadet, but not the lineal heir of the family.<sup>28</sup>

[Welch told his wife to go a different way to his house near Ayr, for] "before you come thither, you shall find the plague broken out in Ayr," which accordingly came to pass.<sup>29</sup>

Mr Bruce, preaching upon the 51st Psalm, said, "The removal of your ministers is at hand; our lives shall be bitterly sought after; but ye shall see with your eyes, that God shall guard us, and be our buckler and defence." The day following, this was in part accomplished.<sup>30</sup>

Catherine Marshall writes this account concerning her husband Peter:

Walking back from a nearby village to Bamburgh one dark, starless night, Peter struck out across the moors, thinking he would take a short cut. He knew that there was a deep deserted limestone quarry close by the Glororum Road, but he thought he could avoid that danger spot. The night was inky black, eerie. There was only the sound of the wind through the heather-stained moorland, the noisy clamor of wild muir fowl as his footsteps disturbed them, the occasional far-off bleating of a sheep.

Suddenly he heard someone call, "Peter! . . ." There was great urgency in the voice.

He stopped. "Yes, who is it? What do you want?"

For a second he listened, but there was no response, only the sound of the wind. The moor seemed completely deserted.

Thinking he must have been mistaken, he walked on a few paces. Then he heard it again, even more urgently:

"Peter! . . ."

He stopped dead still, trying to peer into that impenetrable darkness, but suddenly stumbled and fell to his knees. Putting out his hand to catch himself, he found nothing there. As he cautiously investigated, feeling around in a semicircle, he found himself to be on the very brink of an abandoned stone quarry. Just one step more would have sent him plummeting into space to certain death.<sup>31</sup>

Cotton Mather includes the following reflections:

But then [in addition to the general faith of believers], there is a *Particular Faith*, which is not so much the *Duty*, as the *Comfort* of them that have it; and which is *Granted*, but *here* and *there*, but *now* and *then*, unto those whom a *Sovereign* GOD shall Please to Favour with it. The Devout Believer cannot cause himself to Believe *What* and *When* he will; but under the *Energy* of some *Superiour Cause* . . . there is a *Strong Impression* made upon his mind, which Dissolves him in a Flood of Tears, and Assures him, *Thou shalt have the Petition which thou Desirest of thy GOD*. The Impression is

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 131.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Other predictions and an account of the raising of a man dead forty-eight hours are included on pp. 132–133, 135–136.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 145.

<sup>31</sup> C. Marshall, *A Man Called Peter: The Story of Peter Marshall* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951) 14.

born in upon his mind, with as clear a Light, and as full a Force, as if it were from Heaven *Angelically*, and even *Articulately* declared unto him; *The Lord has given thee, thy Petition which thou hast asked of Him*. . . . But you may have some Illustration of it in what our Martyrology has related concerning that Blessed Martyr, Mr. *Holland*. "After Sentence was Read against him, he said,—*And now I tell you, that GOD hath heard the Prayer of His Servants, which hath been Poured forth with Tears, for His Afflicted Saints, which you daily Persecute. This I dare be bold in GOD to Speak; and I am by His Spirit moved to say it: That GOD will shorten your Hand of Cruelty: For after this Day in this place, there shall be no more put unto the Trial of Fire and Faggot.*" Which accordingly came to pass; He was the last that was Burnt in *Smithfield*. You may see it a little further Illustrated in the *Strange Afflations*, which have Enabled and Impelled many Confessors of CHRIST in the Renowned Church of *Scotland*, sometimes to break forth into Passages that might be Expected from none but such as have Illapses of the *Prophetic Spirit* upon them.<sup>32</sup>

. . . about the Time, when the *Impression* [an instance of particular faith in Increase Mather] was in its Liveliest Operation (*October 1694*) there was among some in his Neighbourhood, a strange Descent of *Shining Spirits*, that had upon them great marks of their being such *Angels* as they Declared themselves to be. (What they were, *GOD knows!*) And from these there was that Message (and, *no more!*) directed unto him; *He is much Exercised in his Mind about his going for England; but he need not and should not be so; For GOD will bring to pass That which will be most for His Glory and Service; And the Angels of GOD will attend him, wheresoever His Providence may dispose of him.*<sup>33</sup>

In the Year, 1676, he had a strange *Impressisio[n sic]* on his mind, that caused him, on Nov. 19, to Preach a Sermon on those Words, *Zeph. III. 7* . . . and Conclude the Sermon, with a *Strange Praediction*, That a *Fire* was a coming, which would make a *Deplorable Desolation*. . . . On the next *Lords-Day*, he Preached . . . that when the Lord JESUS is about to bring any heavy Judgment upon His People, He is wont to stir up the Heart of some Servant of His, to give *Warning* of it; which *Warning* should be *Remembred*, that so People may be ready to entertain what must come upon them. . . . The very *Night following*, a *Desolating Fire* broke forth in his Neighbourhood.<sup>34</sup>

He [Increase Mather] did no less than three Times as the Year, 1678, was coming on, very Publickly Declare, *That he was verily Perswaded, a very Mortal Disease would shortly break in upon the place; and the Slain of the Lord would be many*. Some of his Friends were troubled at him, for it. But when the Year 1678, was come on, we saw the *Mortal Disease*. The *Small-Pox* broke in, . . . The famous Dr. *Henry More*, who is not Ordinarily numbered among *Fanaticks*, has a Passage that may a little Solve some of these *Appearances*. "Though the *Spirit of Prophecy* in some sense be ceased, yet

<sup>32</sup> C. Mather, *Parentator: Memoirs of Remarkables in the Life and the Death of the Ever-Memorable Dr. Increase Mather* (Boston: B. Green, 1724) 189–191. Mather also introduces certain cautions on pp. 191–196 and discusses counterfeits.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 193–194.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 78–79.

GOD hath not hereby Precluded His own Power, nor yet that of His *Ministring Spirits* from Visiting and Assisting of His Servants as He Pleaseth. And there are some *Pious Persons* to whom it must not be Denied, that very *Unusual Things* of one sort or another, have sometimes happened."<sup>35</sup>

On the SIXTH Day of FEBRUARY . . . "I [Increase Mather] was very much Moved and Melted before the Lord, so that for some time, I was not able to speak a Word. But then, I could not but say, *GOD will deliver New-England! GOD will deliver New-England!* . . . So I rose from my knees, with much Comfort and Assurance, that GOD had heard me. These things, I hope, were from the Spirit of GOD." . . . And on the Fourteenth of April following, there arrived Tidings [from England], that on THAT VERY DAY [Feb. 6], there fell out [in England] THAT, which happily diverted and entirely defeated, the coming of Kirk with his Commission for the Government of *New-England*.<sup>36</sup>

Mr. Mather went on with his Preparations for his Voyage; and had his Mind more and more Irradiated with a Strong Perswasion, That GOD would give him to find Things in England, in such a State, as that he should have an Opportunity to do Special Service for His People here. Yea, he went so far in it, as to Write these Marvellous Words upon it;—*I know, it will be so; For Thou, O Lord GOD, hast told me, that it will be so!* And the Truth is, If he had not had some such Faith as this, to have Inspired him with an uncommon Courage, a Person of his Prudence would never have Exposed himself, as he did on a Thousand Accounts in his present Undertaking.<sup>37</sup>

One may also cite the "prophetical" phenomena among the Camisards.<sup>38</sup> But the happenings among the Camisards included disorders and false prophecies. The severe persecutions and the paucity of trained leaders left the people without the will or skill to exercise critical discernment. At a later point, beginning in 1715, the problems were addressed:

Antoine Court, in spite of his youth, was the guide and soul of these assemblies [church synods], and the adhesion of the preachers proves that they were at heart free from unbelief and pride, and had erred involuntarily, or from lack of instruction. They only wanted to be better counselled and directed. . . . The Scriptures were to be held as the only rule of faith, and special revelations were to be rejected, as anti-Biblical and dangerous, (synod of 1715.)<sup>39</sup>

The mixed character of the phenomena among the Camisards confirms the cautions that Mather, Rutherford and others have enjoined. It is compatible with the distinctions that I make between the infallibility of the apostles and the fallibility of later nondiscursive processes.

Modern readers may still entertain doubts whether in every case the above reports accurately describe what happened. Have they been embellished through a process of transmission? But at the very least the reports

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 106.


<sup>38</sup> E.g. P. Joutard, *Les Camisards* (Paris: Gallimard/Julliard, 1976) 57–101.

<sup>39</sup> G. de Félice, *History of the Protestants of France* (New York: Edward Walker, 1851) 450.

indicate what the reporters thought God could do. With few exceptions the reporters stand in the same Reformed theological tradition in which the events supposedly occurred. Hence the reports reveal something of the flexibility of Reformed thinking concerning extraordinary providential actions of God.

All of these extraordinary phenomena can be subsumed under the description given in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.3: "God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure." God's work, so described, surely encompasses all nondiscursive processes. Many of these nondiscursive processes doubtless "make use of means." But because of its strong commitment to the sovereignty of God and the mystery of his plan, the *Confession* acknowledges explicitly that there may also be operations that are not attached to means in any ordinary way. The ultimate determining factor in every case is "his pleasure."

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