**Sign Gifts Resource Paper**

**Lightbearers resource papers are designed as a resource to Lightbearers staff as they interact with students and partners and are asked to provide wisdom on a variety of topics. These papers should not be considered a doctrinal stance in competition with your local church but an internal resource providing clarity on a sound evangelical stance on particular issues. Please seek out the counsel of the church under whose authority you have placed yourself as needed in responding to specific situations.**

**Foundational to each paper is the perspective that the Gospel is primary. No topic competes with the message of the Gospel for primacy in the church. At the same time, the Gospel impacts every corner of life (1 Corinthians 6:20); therefore, we aim to provide staff with direction that is Biblically sound and points them to view any issue through the lens of the Gospel—the good news that we are far more sinful and God far more holy than we thought but the life and grace that God offers through Christ’s death and resurrection is far greater than we dare to hope.**

The term “sign gifts” refers to a sub-section of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are themselves identified most clearly in 1 Corinthians 12 but also in Ephesians 4 and Romans 12. While the New Testament makes no clear identification of “sign gifts,” the term has regularly been used to denote gifts that more clearly offer a sign of divine activity.[[1]](#footnote-1) All gifts, of course, are equally born of the Holy Spirit and are, in that sense, supernatural.

While some commentators would include words of knowledge or discernment of spirits to this list, if we limit ourselves to the most commonly agreed upon sign gifts, we can define the gifts as follows:

* Tongues—Prayer or praise spoken in syllables not understood by the speaker (there are differing opinions on whether these syllables will be in another human language, in the manner of Acts 2)
* Prophecy—Telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind (which may or may not include predicting the future or powerful preaching)
* Miracles—Less common kinds of God’s activity in which He arouses people’s awe and wonder and bears witness to himself (including, but not limited to, physical healing)[[2]](#footnote-2)

All gifts, including the sign gifts, are given for the good of the church rather than the exalting of any individual and love for the brethren trumps the display of any gift. The debate among evangelicals is over whether the sign gifts are still active in the modern church. We will outline here the primary opinions on this topic.

**Cessationism: The sign gifts have ceased**

* **Biblical basis**—The time of the apostles was an extraordinary age. The church was being birthed, Scripture was being written and signs and wonders were prevalent. Now that the church is established and Scripture is canonized, that age has passed, which fits with the Biblical pattern of seasons of signs. Most of the Old Testament does not have men performing miracles. Jesus only did miracles during a small portion of his life and reduced miracle working as he approached the cross. Miracles appear in Acts but receive scant mention in the epistles, so they seem to be dying away within one generation. The appearance of signs and wonders testified to the message of Jesus and the apostles but now that message is recorded in the Bible. Hebrews 1-2 indicates that the message of God is completed with the canonization of Scripture and that miracles are a thing of the past, so the death of the apostles and the canonization of Scripture signals the close of the age of the sign gifts.
* **Members of this camp**—Interestingly, cessationists generally come from two often disagreeing groups—the dispensationalists (e.g. Dallas Theological Seminary) and the reformers. Accordingly, many Baptists and non-denominational believers are cessationists as are reformed Presbyterians. Strict cessationists, such as John Macarthur, argue that all sign gifts have ceased. More generous cessationists include J.I. Packer and Tim Keller, who identifies himself as an “80% cessationist.” These cautious cessationists are skeptical of miracles but also want to respect the testimony of the church around the globe and hold open the possibility of God acting in this way.
* **Dangers of this position**— At its worst, cessationism can deny the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, who is Himself a member of the Godhead and the Helper that God has given us. Strict cessationists can err by looking to mediate God’s work through their own plan. Instead of a yearning for the Spirit, there is a yearning for knowledge and control. Keller puts it this way: “Reformed people are afraid of experience. We are. We would much rather have a logical argument…We’re for revival in general but on the ground, we have the tendency to just squash it.”

**Continuationism: The sign gifts continue**

* **Biblical basis**—Scripture seems to assume the gifts will continue. Prophets and miracles appear throughout Scripture whenever God chooses to act in that way. At Pentecost, when Christ sent the Holy Spirit and inaugurated the age of the Spirit, Peter quotes Joel 2, stating that this age will include visions and prophecies. The book of Acts is, at least in part, a picture of the Holy Spirit’s work within the church and records numerous instances of speaking in tongues, prophecy and miracles. Some of these activities are tied to the apostles but others are not, [[3]](#footnote-3) and the gifts are mentioned in passing in the epistles as if they are fairly common. When Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 that “we prophesy in part but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away with,” he is referring to the day when Christ returns. Until Christ returns, and as long as the church needs edification, the gifts are needed, for they were given for that purpose.
* **Members of this camp**—Strict continuationists are “charismatics,” churches such as many Assemblies of God and non-denominational churches, who believe that the sign gifts are normative, though non-salvific, realities for the church. More cautious continuationists exist within most evangelical denominations and align with leaders such as Wayne Grudem, John Piper and Matt Chandler. These cautious continuationists are more closely linked to cautious cessationists like Tim Keller than they are to strict continuationists, but they do have a greater sense of expectation regarding the sign gifts.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* **Dangers of this position**—Consider how Paul rebuked the Corinthians who were exalting one gift over others and seeking spiritual experiences over love for one another. Their meetings were a mush of confusion without honoring the order that God ordained in the church. Today, these errors appear as showmanship Christianity that exalts individuals and leaves believers chasing after a sign, the next cool spiritual experience, rather than praising what He has already donein Christ. In doing so, we look for proof rather than faith and we implicitly say that what He has done is not enough. This mindset that God has more out there for me easily morphs into the treacherous prosperity gospel, according to which we can expect good faith and performance to be rewarded with tangible blessing in this life. A final continuationist danger is a minimization of Scripture and a creating of a god in our own image as we look for God in feeling and experience rather than revealed truth.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Finally, keep in mind that some groups look to the sign gifts as proof of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostal churches are the clearest example of this theology but it is often individuals such as Benny Hinn who are best known.[[6]](#footnote-6) Scripture, however, clearly identifies speaking in tongues as *one* of the gifts within the Corinthian church and not the only evidence of baptism in the Spirit. Teaching that exalts speaking in tongues (either as evidence of salvation or as a subsequent required baptism in the Spirit) leaves individuals with the expectation that something else is required for full acceptance by God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Summary**

There is freedom to align yourself with either the cessationist or continuationist camp, and so long as someone holds to the Gospel (as opposed to requiring something extra for salvation) and Scripture as the source and judge of truth, we should debate cordially. Fight for the primary issue of the Gospel rather than secondary issues. As for counseling students, follow these four principles:

* **Take the best from each group and avoid the worst.** May we use our minds *and* our emotions as we worship. May we value the tradition of the church *and* life. May we live in light of God’s transcendence *and* His immanence. May we plead for and look for the Spirit’s work in our world *and* may we long for heaven, knowing that this life was not meant to be heaven. Fight against becoming a Pharisee *and* a false prophet.
* **Teach them to know the Word.** If you want to know God’s voice, know the Word, for the Spirit will always point to Christ (rather than himself) and will never contradict the Bible. As millenials become leaders in the church, the greater danger seems to be Biblical literacy and a chasing after experience rather than a too rigid commitment to traditional form (the opposite may have been true a generation ago). Therefore, the protection against the extremes of continuationists is to know Scripture very well. Someone who believes they have a prophetic word or a message in tongues should always measure that word against Scripture. Does the display of a sign gift point towards the person or towards Christ? Does it exalt the individual or edify the church?
* **Teach them about the Holy Spirit.** Scripture regularly refers to the Holy Spirit as a gift from God. Oh, may we not be guilty of neglecting this gift! Teach students who the Spirit is, value Him as the third and equal person of the Trinity and seek after His gifts (and His fruit). Ephesians 5 instructs believers to be filled with the Spirit. Seek out a regular filling of the Spirit, His conviction of sin and empowering for ministry. Encourage students who are unsure of the Spirit to study Scripture about Him and then seek to engage with Him. Use the word of God to explain the Spirit’s work without replacing it.
* **Push them to their local churches for the “non-one anothers.”** In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul advises control in the use of the gifts, in essence, curbing the “open mic” policy that seemed to be in place. The authority of local church elders is integral to the employing of the sign gifts. Therefore, in a Lightbearers context, spiritual gifts that fall out of the realm of the “one anothers” of Scripture should be utilized within their local church (e.g. roommates should serve one another but not take on authoritative roles of teacher, prophet, etc.).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Resources for further reading:

<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-i-am-a-cessationist>

http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-i-am-a-continuationist/

J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*

Gordon Fee, *Paul, The Spirit and the People of God*

Wayne Grudem, Sam Storms, Richard Gaffin, Stanley Gundry, Doug Oss and Robert Saucy, *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*

1. Cf. John’s identifying Christ’s miracles as “signs” (e.g. John 2:11) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These definitions are taken from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (1994) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. E.g. Galatians 3:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To muddy the waters even more, in between strict and cautious continuationists is a movement started in the 1980s referred to as the Third Wave, which is most commonly associated with the Vineyard Fellowship but much modern worship music (e.g. Hillsong United) probably fits here as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew 7:21-23 acknowledges that some will perform signs in the name of Jesus but not actually be his people (cf. Matthew 16:4). 1 John 4:1 and 1 Corinthians 14:29 are also among those passages that warn against taking prophecy at face value. Sign gifts are clearly not evidence of salvation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Assemblies of God denomination has its roots in the Pentecostal movement, and the official doctrine of the denomination continues to hold this doctrine although many individual churches no longer hold to this view. (See http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/topics/baptmhs\_faq\_tongues.cfm for the doctrinal statement.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For example, the 3,000 new believers of Acts 2:41 do not seem to have spoken in tongues. The other times believers speak in tongues—Acts 8, 10, and 19, display moments when the Gospel is advancing to new geographic areas. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In the event that all house members are members of the same church, they should talk with their church leadership about the use of their gifts in their house. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)