

The Cessationist ‘Sufficiency’ Argument (CSA) and the New Testament Gift of Prophecy

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Abstract: The past five years has witnessed a wide resurgence of popular interest in the question of continuationism /cessationism. Surveying these debates from a continuationist perspective, one notices a plethora of biblical, historical, and theological peculiarities. One of these peculiarities is what I will call the Cessationist ‘Sufficiency’ Argument (CSA). CSA states that the ongoing practice of the NT gift of prophecy is a “denial of the sufficiency of scripture.” Using a combined method of biblical adequacy and conceptual clarification, I test the overall cogency of CSA as its usually presented by cessationist scholars. In this paper, I (1) lay out the basic presuppositions of CSA; (2) briefly examine the doctrine of scripture; (3) critically review and reconstruct instances of CSA in the cessationist literature, (4) review 1st person testimony to the practice of the NT gift of prophecy today, before (5) summarizing my critical conclusions. I will argue that CSA is ultimately unbiblical and argumentatively incoherent, and that it presents a misuse of the doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture.

Key Words: cessationism, continuationism, gift of prophecy, scripture, sufficiency

It’s rare in my life that people have had words of prophecy which are specifically and dramatically: “this is what God is saying to you.” There have been rare occasions when that has actually been the case, and Maggie and I have had to say, “oh my goodness, this looks as though this a real word from the Lord.”

This of course doesn't confuse the gift of prophecy with scripture. God is good. God is gracious. God can speak today through his people. But at every point we are scripturally formed Christians who must carefully discern when such words are spoken, just as we are asked to do in scripture (1Th 5:19-21).¹ --N.T. Wright

Some claim "we can't have prophecy today because that would risk having post-biblical doctrine." What about teaching? Can that risk post-biblical doctrine? It does all the time, even more than prophecy. ...[Prophecy] doesn't add new doctrine. That's not the function of prophecy [and] I'm against adding new doctrine. But guess what? The doctrine that prophecy has ceased is itself a post-biblical doctrine. It's the very thing that it claims to try to guard against. Scripture actually commands us to seek the gifts.² --Craig Keener

Introduction

The past five years has witnessed a wide resurgence of popular interest in the question of continuationism / cessationism. As Sakač notes, "Cessationism is a doctrine according to which the gifts of the Spirit, such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, and healing, have essentially ceased, or disappeared with the Apostolic age."³ The opposite view - that the relevant gifts of the Spirit are proper to the church age unto the *Parousia*, has come to be called *continuationism*. This

¹ N.T. Wright, "Pentecost: Reflections on a Gift," *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology*, (2025): forthcoming.

² Craig S. Keener, "Old Testament Prophets vs. The Gift of Prophecy - Part 2," *YouTube*, 11/16/2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7B04NALX_M8.

³ Matej Sakač, "Theology of the Baptism in the Spirit and Gifts of the Spirit in the Thought of Martyn Lloyd-Jones and His Differences, Similarities, and Contributions in Comparison to Pentecostal Interpretation," *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology*, 18/1 (2023): 23-40; 33, note 7.

resurgence of interest in the debate is evidenced by numerous popular⁴ and scholarly⁵ books, podcast discussions (Didache, Remnant Radio, etc.), wider social media debate, and even a documentary film (*Cessationist*, 2023). Surveying these debates from a continuationist perspective, one notices a plethora of biblical, historical, and theological peculiarities. One of these peculiarities I will treat in this paper, what I will call the Cessationist ‘Sufficiency’ Argument (CSA). CSA states, with Buice, that *the ongoing practice of the NT gift of prophecy is a “denial of the sufficiency of scripture.”*⁶ Using a combined method of biblical adequacy and conceptual clarification, I test the overall cogency of CSA as its usually presented by cessationist scholars. In what follows, I will (1) lay out the basic presuppositions of CSA; (2) briefly examine the doctrine of scripture with particular focus on its *sufficiency*; (3) critically review and reconstruct instances of CSA in the cessationist literature, (4) review 1st person testimony to the practice of the NT gift of prophecy today, before (5) summarizing my critical conclusions. I will argue that CSA is ultimately unbiblical and argumentatively incoherent, and that it presents a *misuse* of the doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture.

⁴ Jim Osman, *God Doesn’t Whisper* (Kootenai: Kootenai Community Church Publishing, 2020). Tom Pennington, *A Biblical Case for Cessationism: Why the Miraculous Gifts of the Spirit Have Ended* (Atlanta: G3 Press, 2023).

⁵ Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022). Thomas R. Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2018).

⁶ Josh Buice, “Why Modern Prophecy Is False and God’s Word Is Inerrant and Sufficient: A Response to Sam Storms,” *Delivered by Grace*, March 20, 2024: https://g3min.org/why-modern-prophecy-is-false-and-gods-word-is-inerrant-and-sufficient-a-response-to-sam-storms/?srsltid=AfmBOoqKvfNVA8vDPIsnDjjs8_QnWfY-3b0tejjQa0Lskl9bEkwouTTz.

1. The Doctrine of Scripture

In fact, scripture is the authoritative, true, trustworthy, necessary, sufficient, effective, intelligible, and written form of the Word of God. This is how and why it can function as the *norma normans* (“the rule that rules”), or the norm by which any other particular source of Christian thought and life (e.g. tradition, reason, experience, etc.) can be properly understood and critically evaluated. This is not in wide dispute among churches who - in part or whole, historically owe their existence and continuing orientation to the trajectory of thought and practice that emerged in the Reformation (and it’s offshoots: Puritanism, Pietism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, etc.). This status of Scripture as the *norming norm* is the crux of the Reformation doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. Even so, it nevertheless must be noted that this doctrine has been open to various sorts of confusion. As Kevin Vanhoozer rightly underlines,

‘Sola scriptura’ is not the answer to the question ‘How many sources should one use in doing theology?’ ‘Sola scriptura’ no more rules out the role of faith or the Holy Spirit than ‘sola fide’ rules out ‘sola gratia’, or that ‘solus Christus’ rules out God the Father and God the Spirit. To suggest that ‘sola’ always means ‘(absolutely) alone’ is to fail to attend to how the Reformers actually used the term. ...Stated negatively, ‘sola scriptura’ is the statement that the church can err.⁷

That “the church can err” is just another way of saying that other sources of Christian thought and life are *insufficient of themselves*. The various theological and moral excesses that

⁷ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 232-233; quoted in Fred Sanders, “Timothy Ward, Words of Life,” *The Scriptorium Daily*, May 31, 2011: <https://scriptoriumdaily.com/timothy-ward-words-of-life/>.

sparked the Reformation show that *tradition* can certainly err.⁸ Or this is also why the Enlightenment valorization of human *reason* - and the theologies positively shaped by it, has given rise to a variety of historically aberrant theological proposals.⁹ This insufficiency is especially clear for the category of *experience* as a theological source, not only in non-Christian contexts (Mormonism, Aum Shinrikyo, etc.) but even among self-identified Christians (say, a Müntzer or Swedenborg). Now notice, as Scripture itself - and 2000 years of church witness for good and ill, testifies: *tradition* (Mt 13:52; 2Thes 2:15) *reason* (Isa 1:18, 1Pet 3:15) and *experience* (1Jhn 1:1-4, Rev 12:11) clearly *are* legitimate sources of theological reflection, but absent their connection to and *nesting in* biblical witness, they can be fundamentally unreliable and generate needless forms of confusion, division, and so on.

Be that as it may, the doctrine of Scripture has nevertheless been historically open to various sorts of misapplication and even abuse. This can be seen in obvious forms in classical fundamentalism that, in defiance of the bible's literary diversity, in each case treats it in a hyper-literalistic fashion, as if it were uniform science textbook, or the like. This is moreover clear among various sectarian groups who claim to be "*more* biblical" than classical Christianity (Oneness Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.). Yet there are ostensibly more sophisticated forms of this same problem. For example, in the context of treating the doctrine of the Trinity, Fred Sanders rightly laments,

the grim shadow of merely verbal-propositional revelation still hovers over the theological landscape, at

⁸ See Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023); Gavin Ortlund, *What It Means to Be Protestant: The Case for an Always-Reforming Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024).

⁹ For criticism of liberal theology, see Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, (trans.) Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); Roger E. Olson, *Against Liberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022).

least in conservative quarters, it is worth taking a moment to abjure it. It is very bad. There is no surer way to strip the doctrine of the Trinity of all of its significance and desiccate most of its interest than to treat it as the transferal of a set of facts about God that were revealed for their own sake as mere information. The resulting pile of Bible verses or heap of doctrinal statements is theologically and spiritually inert. In such treatments, we get the impression that “we ourselves have nothing to do with this mystery of the Holy Trinity except to know something ‘about it’ through revelation.” This dry approach, with its reduction of revelation to non-soteriological statements whose power is identical with their authority, is now uncommon in academic theology, but still fairly widespread in doctrinal writing for the churches.¹⁰

In general, then, the danger seems to be a particular sort of *verbal reductionism* that denies Scripture’s own testimony to the various other sources of theological knowledge. Here, theological truth is reduced to merely the brute exchange of information, to the exclusion of the living ways God uses tradition, reason, and experience to relate with his people. As has been amply witnessed throughout church history, such reductionism can itself in the end motivate needless forms of confusion, division, and conflict. With Sanders, and as Scripture itself discloses: revelation is “more than words, but not less” (Ibid.). That Scripture is the *norma normans* (“the rule that rules”) means that the church can err, but this does not and *cannot* nullify the variety of ways God has and can reveal himself. The Bible is special and sufficient as a unique source and in its evaluative role for this variety, but becomes subject to abuse when its authority is misapplied, flattened out, etc. Such can and does lead to more invidious forms of idolatry, for example: *bibliolatry* (the total identification and worship of the Bible *as* God, instead of as what it is: the written form of

¹⁰ Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 16.

the Word of God). In what follows, I will argue that some forms of cessationist argumentation are verbally reductionistic in something like Sanders' sense, especially in debates over the ongoing continuation of the NT gift of prophecy.

1.a. What is the Bible?

To treat this question adequately one must begin with what scripture itself has to say. Jesus' own view of scripture was quite similar to the normative Jewish views of his day. As Matthew reports, Jesus says: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mt. 24:35, cf. Psa 119:89, Isa 40:8, etc.). Across the NT, we hear consistent echoes of OT witness concerning scripture. For example, Isaiah prophesies, "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11). The author of Hebrews says "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12-14). Here, the Bible testifies concerning itself that scripture is *of divine origin* - issuing from God to his people to accomplish his good purposes in the world. Moreover, as God's written Word, scripture is fundamentally *reliable* and ultimately *effective*. These properties are not just a feature of particular parts of scripture, but are proper to the biblical canon *as a whole* (cf. 2Pet 3:15-16). Paul writes that "*All Scripture* is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17, my emphasis). This underlines scripture's divine origins and suggests that it is not only *reliable* and *effective*, but also *sufficient* for the life of the believer.

Scripture's reliability deserves more comment. How precisely is scripture reliable? First, scripture is reliable in that it is *true*

in two senses: (i) scripture is without error in all that it actually teaches, and (ii) it does not deceive or mislead in any way. The first sense has come to be termed “inerrancy,” and the second “infallibility.” These are fancy ways of merely saying that the Bible is true and trustworthy. This view was not only widely held in biblical times, but was also affirmed and carried forward by many of the church fathers. For example, Irenaeus held “that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit” (*Against Heresies*, 2.28.2).¹¹ Or Tertullian states that, “The statements of Holy Scripture will never be discordant with truth” (*A Treatise on the Soul*, 21). Scripture’s truth and trustworthiness implies its fundamental *unity* or *harmony*, as Origen taught:

And likewise he becomes a peacemaker as he demonstrates that which appears to others to be a conflict in the Scriptures is no conflict, and exhibits their concord and peace, whether of the Old Scriptures with the New, or of the Law with the Prophets or of the gospels with the Apostolic Scriptures, or of the Apostolic Scriptures with each other... For as the different chords of the psalter or the lyre, each of which gives forth a certain sound of its own which seems unlike the sound of another chord, are thought by a man who is not musical and ignorant of the principle of musical harmony (*Commentary on Matthew*, 2).

This principle of unity was the general consensus of the early church fathers. As Justin Martyr states, “Since I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another, I shall admit that I do not understand what is recorded, and shall strive to persuade those who imagine that the Scriptures are contradictory, to be rather of the same opinion as myself”

¹¹ All quotations of the church fathers are from Derek J. Brown, “Inerrancy and Church History: The Early Fathers,” *From the Study*, 10/13/2014: <https://fromthestudy.com/2014/10/13/inerrancy-and-church-history-the-early-fathers/>.

(*Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, 65). Or as Augustine states in a letter to Jerome, “For it seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books; that is to say, that the men by whom the Scripture has been given to us, and committed to writing, did put down in these books anything false” (*Letters*, 28). Moreover, according to Brown,

In his *Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon*, Augustine set the Scripture apart from other theological writings—including his own—stating that the latter may, in certain instances, “[fall] short of the truth in obscure and recondite matters.” Therefore, Christians are “without obligation to believe” what is contained in these treatises; they are beholden only to place themselves under the authority of the canonical Scriptures.¹²

With Augustine, scripture is set apart in the unique authority that it bears. The testimony of scripture itself, and that of the early church fathers, hold scripture to be (1) *authoritative* (of divine origin), (2) *true* (without error), (3) *trustworthy* (without deceptive intent), (4) *necessary* (for knowing God and living the Christian life), (5) *sufficient* (in all that it teaches), (6) *effective* (accomplishing God’s purposes), (7) *harmonious* or *unified* (not in basic conflict with itself), and (8) *intelligible* (capable of being understood by conscientious readers). Despite routine questioning over the years, scripture has consistently withstood various forms of skeptical onslaught. To this day, when Christians refer to the Bible as God’s Word, these eight properties are in view. Moreover, by the end of the era of the early church fathers, the final canon of scripture was widely recognized, used, and formally codified. The canon of Christian scripture is *closed*, or in other words: we shouldn’t expect any new additions to the canon before

¹² Ibid.

Christ's return, and any attempt to augment the canon we have should be vigorously resisted.¹³

1.b. The Sufficiency of Scripture

Since cessationists routinely focus on the sufficiency of scripture as a reason for rejecting the NT gift of prophecy, its worth a closer look. Scripture is adequate or *sufficient* “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2Tim 3:16), or in short: for “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2Pet 1:3). It requires no additions or subtractions. This means that the content of scripture - its testimony to redemptive history and its discursive teaching across the diversity of the kinds of literature it contains, is complete and adequate for the Christian life. This does *not* mean, however, that it comprehensively treats every aspect of life in particular detail. As Yarnell and Dockery underline,

The sufficiency of Scripture is an extremely important, foundational, and necessary doctrine. We must, however, be careful not to *misuse* the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. First, we must remember that the Scriptures do not provide exhaustive teaching. For instance, Scripture does not speak to everything about creation. Second, the doctrine of Scriptural sufficiency does not suggest that creeds and confessions have no place in the life of the church. Of course, the doctrine of sufficiency reminds believers that credal statements must themselves derive from Scripture. Third, Scripture does not address some of the mundane matters of life, such as how to perform integral calculus. However, Scripture does adequately provide us the spiritual and

¹³ See F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018). And admitting here, of course, augmentation due to carefully sifted and scientifically authenticated manuscript evidence.

moral principles by which we should conduct ourselves in the world (my emphasis).¹⁴

Vanhoozer further clarifies,

The Bible is *materially insufficient* for planning a lunar landing, dealing with diabetes, or even deciding on what day Easter falls. On the other hand, Scripture is *formally sufficient* for providing a transdisciplinary Christian hermeneutic because it provides a storied framework and social imaginary with which to interpret extrabiblical data *biblically*...¹⁵

Finally, we should emphasize that, whereas its *material insufficiency* for certain ends simply means it doesn't explicitly treat every conceivable content, it actually does furnish principles that are relevant to any conceivable content (in their various contexts of relevance). Scripture has nothing to explicitly say about how to do calculus, how to throw a fast ball, how to fix a car, etc., but it has much to say about how to conduct oneself in the midst of all of life's particular situations. Noting these considerations, we are now positioned to review CSA.

2. The Cessationist 'Sufficiency' Argument (CSA)

Cessationist doctrine consists of a cluster of (ostensibly) exegetical, historical, and systematic claims, and here I will primarily focus on one of them. As asserted by Buice: "Modern Prophecy Is a Denial of the Sufficiency of Scripture..." (Buice, 2024). Buice's assertion summarizes a basic argument that is

¹⁴ Yarnell III, Malcolm B. and David S. Dockery. "The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture: An Introduction." In *The Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture*, edited by Adam W. Greenway and David S. Dockery (Fort Worth: Seminary Hill Press, 2022), 10.

¹⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Sufficiency of Scripture: A Critical and Constructive Account," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 49/3 (2021): 218-234; 231.

central to the cessationist's case, and is pervasively held across the literature.¹⁶ For example, Pennington asserts,

The New Testament teaches that the result of God's completed revelation is an all-sufficient Scripture in many places. Second Timothy chapter 3 verse 16, "All Scripture is inspired by God, it's profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequately equipped for every good work." There's nothing left. The man of God needs no additional revelation from God, he has it all right here. ...The Spirit speaks only in and through the inspired Word.¹⁷

Informally stated, CSA seems to argue (a) scripture is complete and sufficient revelation, (b) the NT gift of prophecy involves revelation of a sort, therefore (c) the NT gift of prophecy has ceased with the closure of the canon. In light of this conclusion, (d) the putative post-biblical practice of NT prophecy denies the sufficiency of scripture. It does this because it treats scripture as lacking in some way, or in need of supplemental "revelations." This informal argument contains a few other unstated premises:

1. Scripture is God's written Word
2. God's Word is his revelation to human kind

¹⁶ See for example Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Cessationism," in Wayne A. Grudem (ed.) *Are the Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 25-64; Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2000); MacArthur John. *Strange Fire The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2013); Pennington, Tom. *A Biblical Case for Cessationism: Why the Miraculous Gifts of the Spirit Have Ended* (Atlanta: G3 Press, 2023); O.P. Robertson, *The Final Word: A Biblical Response to the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2011); etc.

¹⁷ Pennington, Tom. "A Case for Cessationism," *Grace To You*, 10/17/2013: <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/TM13-7/a-case-for-cessationism-tom-pennington>.

3. Scripture is authoritative, true, trustworthy, necessary, sufficient, effective, unified, and intelligible revelation.
4. The canon of scripture is complete and closed
5. Revelation is as such complete and closed
6. The NT gift of prophecy involves revelation of a sort
7. With the closure of the canon, the NT gift of prophecy has as such ceased.
8. Therefore, the putative contemporary practice of NT prophecy is false.
9. Putative contemporary prophecy moreover denies the sufficiency of scripture.

The trouble with this argument is manifold. Premise 7 does not logically follow from the prior premises, and in fact impugns the unity of scripture by needlessly *forcing* the Bible to conflict with itself. The central problem here resides in how “revelation” is conceived and employed. The argument presumes that “revelation” is a kind of wooden or undifferentiated monolith. A mere glance at how scripture uses the word “revelation” is enough to dispel this mist.

The verb “to reveal” (*apokalyptō*) is used 26 times in the NT and 98 times in the LXX. It means “to uncover” or to “lay open that which is veiled.”¹⁸ A review of biblical usage shows that the term structurally involves a threefold reference, what I will call (1) *situational*, (2) *economic*, and (3) *holistic* reference. These three are irreducibly related: events of situational revelation depends on the economic for its overall meaning, and the economic in turn depends on holistic revelation for its unity. *Situational* revelation refer to the unveiling of specific information in particular life situations. *Economic* revelation refer to the unveiling of one moment or part of revelation in its broadest sense. *Holistic* revelation refers to the unveiling of the

¹⁸ “ἀποκαλύπτω,” *Blue Letter Bible*, retrieved, 3/26/2025:
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g601/esv/mgnt/0-1/>.

faith *in* its broadest sense: to the faith *as such and as an unfolding whole*. Biblical usage displays this threefold reference:

Situational:

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. (Num 22:31, LXX)

If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent (1Cor 14:30)

then the lawless one will be revealed (2Thes 2:3-8).

Economic:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom 8:18).

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed (Gal 3:23).

the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1Pet 1:5).

Holistic:

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God (1Cor 2:10).

was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles... (Gal 1:16).

which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit (Eph 3:5).

Notice here, *situational* revelation unveils particular information about the immediate context encountered by those to whom the revelation is made. God reveals to Balaam the sober urgency of his immediate situation. Paul provides instruction for practically managing the NT gift of prophecy in the weekly assembly. And Paul himself further prophesies about the eschatological role and the forthcoming unveiling of anti-Christ to the Thessalonian church. The revelation of Agabus in Acts 11 is another good example of *situational* revelation. Situational revelation is highly particular, context dependent, and episodic, occurring in the immediate rhythms and flow of life in the midst of actively unfolding situations.

In distinction from *situational* revelation, *economic* revelation refers to particular parts or moments of revelation in its broader sense. Paul and Peter eschatologically refer to the revelation of glory that *will be* unveiled to us at Jesus' return. Paul further refers to the relation between the Old and New Covenants. This aspect is termed "economic" because it refers to particular acts of God in the unfolding of God's plan across redemptive history, that in part constitutes the structure of revelation in its broadest sense: Creation, Flood, Abraham, Exodus/Sinai, David, Christ, Pentecost, and Second Advent. Economic revelation always generates questions, since its an unveiling of a particular moment in a broader story.

Finally, *holistic* revelation refers to the faith, not only or merely in specific and immediate situations, and it does not only refer to one part or moment of revelation writ large, but rather refers to the faith in its *unfolding totality*. Holistic revelation grounds and unifies this totality fundamentally revealed in the Person of Jesus, the Messiah, Son, and Reconciler of the infinite and the finite. In the incarnation and Pentecost - and the totality of the scripture's "storied framework" (Vanhoozer):

God has revealed himself, his triunity, his plan for human kind, and everything necessary for our life and godliness. In this light, it must be said: Christian theology has long recognized the differentiated character of revelation.

Geerhardus Vos distinguishes between what he calls “act-revelation,” “word-revelation,” and “character-revelation.”¹⁹ The former designates distinct actions, say: creation, flood, the Exodus, sending fire from heaven in response to Elijah’s prayer, and so on. “Word-revelation” designates the words that accompany God’s distinct acts, and ultimately encompasses scripture itself. “Character-revelation” designates the disclosure of God’s person, character, and attributes in and through his acts and words. The distinction between act- and word- revelation involves a question, insofar as God’s speech is itself an act of a sort, and God’s acts are themselves always and in some sense communicative. Indeed, theological uses of contemporary speech-act theory straightforwardly recognize God’s acts and God’s words as two different modes of divine action.²⁰ This is moreover reflected in biblical language use itself. For example, Schumacher notes that “[t]he Hebrews equate the word and the deed or event; and *dabar* may mean both, as its cognate, *dab-er* (to speak), carries also the idea of acting or behaving. Both word and deed express the will of the agent; they are part of his being.”²¹ Vos himself recognizes this, and at least implicitly suggests a kind of organic relationship between God’s acts, words, and persons in the event of revelation. For this reason, John Frame’s relevant categories perhaps better capture what is it at issue. He maps a similar

¹⁹ Geerhardus Vos. *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 15, 371-372, etc. This paragraph first appeared in Jay Marsh, “God’s Mighty Acts: A Note on the Paradigmatic Character of Divine Action,” *Pneuma*, 47/2 (2025): 224-244.

²⁰ Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

²¹ Frederick T. Schumacher, “The Word of God As Event,” *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 20/4 (Oct., 1952): 251-254, 252.

set of distinctions in what he calls “modes of revelation,” namely: “event-revelation,” “word-revelation,” and “person-revelation.”²² These distinctions allow us to pick out the concrete dimensions of God’s holistic action in the event of revelation without abstracting one dimension at the expense of others or losing the organic character of their irreducible interrelationship. Event-revelation (God’s particular deeds) and word-revelation are always and necessarily modes of divine action, and inexorably refer to and are disclosive of God’s tripersonal being.²³

Both the biblical text and theological tradition disclose that revelation in its *holistic* sense inexorably involves five necessary and irreducible dimensions: revelation is (a) *personal*, (b) *historical*, (c) *propositional*, (d) *covenantal*, and (e) *transformational*. As such, treating revelation always requires a mature sense of proportionality, or sensitivity to how these five dimensions hang together in particular exegetical and historical cases, carefully attending to its situational and economic referentiality (what Lints calls the *textual* and *epochal horizons* of scriptural reading²⁴). In the modern era especially, the temptation has been to valorize one of these dimensions at the expense of the others, say: the propositional to the exclusion of the personal and historical, or vice versa; or forgetting that the personal is always and irreducibly covenantal, or that God’s initiatory grace is always and necessarily transformational. If scripture and the theological tradition are reliable guides, then we must conclude that revelation’s fivefold aspects (personal, historical, propositional, covenantal, transformational) and threefold reference (situational, economic, and holistic) are necessary and

²² John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, IV.24, 497-498.

²³ That God’s acts and words are always also *events* preserves the Creator/creature distinction, insofar as it implies both the relational context of creation and God’s unfolding plan of redemption.

²⁴ See Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 239-250.

essential to the very event of revelation, as such. In this light, the manifold problems with CSA become clearly evident.

3. Critique of the Cessationist ‘Sufficiency’ Argument (CSA)

Returning to CSA, we are now positioned to show the basic problems in the argument. As I noted above:

3.a. Objection 1: *P7 does not logically follow from the prior premises, and hence P8 and P9 cannot be validly derived from it.* This means that there is no reason to suppose that closure of the canon necessitates the cessation of the NT gift of prophecy (and tongues, healing, etc.). This alone means that CSA *fails*. The Bible never teaches that scripture and the NT gift of prophecy are in any sort of necessary competition or conflict. They serve quite different functions. Both biblical usage and the theological tradition actually show that revelation is not a wooden or undifferentiated monolith. The event of revelation itself remains necessarily differentiated. Situational revelation does not and in fact *cannot alter* economic and holistic content, because it depends on them for their meaning (and not vice versa). If someone claiming to practice the NT gift of prophecy tried to alter the revealed content of economic and holistic revelation, for example: by trying to introduce new doctrine not grounded in scripture itself, they would in fact *fail* to actually prophesy in the NT sense. Continuationists themselves affirm the sufficiency of scripture, which leads to our second objection.

3.b. Objection 2: *CSA tries to annul the authority and force of the bits of scripture it doesn't like* (Rom 12:3-8; 1Cor 12:7-11, 28-29, 13:8-10, 14:1, 29-40; Eph 4:11-13; 1Thess 5:19-21, etc.). Biblical testimony to and instruction concerning the gifts are robbed of their force, relegating their authority and relevance to the past. Buice tries to mitigate this charge by (i) an analogizing appeal to the Trinity, and (ii) reference to the progressive character of biblical revelation itself.²⁵ The first is

²⁵ Buice, 2024

falsified by the fact that, though the word “Trinity” is not explicitly used, the Bible actually does give quite robust exegetical support for trinitarian doctrine.²⁶ By contrast, the *very idea* of cessationism literally lacks *any* exegetical grounding, and the only text that suggests that they will one day cease clearly says that this will be at Christ’s *Parousia* (1Cor 13:8-12), at the very consummation of the age. Buice’s second point is falsified by the very content of progressive revelation itself: the Incarnation and Pentecost fundamentally transform and in a sense *democratize* the OT Spirit of prophecy (Joel 2:28-30; Acts 2; Rev 19:10, etc.), mediated by Christ’s own prophetic office (the *munus triplex*) and the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.²⁷ As such, CSA gives itself the right to simply ignore - and *defiantly disobey*? (e.g. 1Cor 14:1, 1Thess 5:19-21, etc.) - quite clear biblical instruction, and itself violates the principles of the unity and effectiveness of scripture.²⁸ And it does this precisely, following Sanders, Dockery, and Yarnell: by both the clear *misuse* of the doctrine of sufficiency and a bald act of *verbal reductionism* (the reduction of the differentiated content and character of revelation itself to a wooden monolith).

3.c. Objection 3: *Thoroughly considered, CSA is both counter-biblical and ultimately incoherent.* When we actually consult the parts of scripture that CSA seeks to suspend, we find a quite interesting situation. Recall that Paul instructs, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good” (1Thess 5:19-21). If the NT gift of prophecy in practice is indeed *testable* as Paul teaches, then it *cannot* be the case that (a) it’s legitimacy can be *a priori*

²⁶ Sam Storms makes this same point, see Sam Storms, “The Numerous Errors in Josh Buice’s Response to my View of Prophecy – Part One,” *Enjoying God*, May 6, 2024: <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog/post/the-numerous-errors-in-josh-buice-s-response-to-my-view-of-prophecy-part-one>.

²⁷ E.g. see N.T. Wright, forthcoming.

²⁸ I’m indebted to Storms for this point, see Sam Storms, 2024.

excluded, and (b) that the prophetic episodes are “infallible” like the canon of scripture - for if they were, *no testing would be necessary*. As such, the cessationist critique of the NT gift of prophecy by appeal to the sufficiency of scripture is ultimately *incoherent* - and this *in light of what scripture actually teaches*. This is ultimately *why* Wayne Grudem rightly argues that the NT gift of prophecy consists of “merely human words reporting what God brought to mind.”²⁹ This means that *particular cases* of the NT gift of prophecy in practice remain available for testing, but *not* the question of the ongoing legitimacy of the gift itself. We have *no* exegetical basis for presuming the cessation of the gift of prophecy (and tongues, healing, etc.). We should emphasize that CSA ironically fails to attend to scripture’s own use of the term “revelation,” and something like the distinctions laid out above. It as such counts as what Yarnell and Dockery call the “misuse” of the doctrine of sufficiency. Really consider this: that scripture’s teaching is not exhaustive overlaps with where the NT gift of prophecy usually functions: *immediate situations in everyday life, quite often involving circumstances not explicitly treated in scripture itself*. This however does not (and *cannot*) impugn scripture’s sufficiency, insofar as revelation’s economic and holistic content precisely ground, orient, and articulate the proper meaning of any and every authentic

²⁹ Wayne Grudem, “A Response to O. Palmer Robertson,” *WayneGrudem.com*, retrieved 3/18/2025: <https://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Robertson-O-Palmer-response-by-WG.pdf>34. See also Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000). In light of what scripture actually teaches, it must be concluded that the debate concerning the gifts is in fact *distorted* by the apriori insinuation of a particular (and quite modernist) “infallibility” theory. This structures a good bit of the current debate and should be rejected as an appropriate strategy for exegeting what the scripture has to say on the matter. This of course is not a denial of the doctrine of scripture and the eight properties it involves, its rather merely a rejection of a very particular articulation of that doctrine as an appropriate medium for the exegetical debate. Poythress (1996), for example, does precisely this. As D.A. Carson somewhere notes, this move is ultimately grounded in bad biblical historiography and an ultimately overly psychologistic (and underly covenantal) attempts to determine the genetic shape of inspiration in the process of “inscripturation.”

instance of the NT gift of prophecy in practice. Given the *testability* of the NT gift of prophecy as Paul articulates it, *all* cessationist attempts to utilize infallibility theory to structure exegetical debates are ultimately question begging, in light of what scripture itself actually, materially teaches about the NT gift of prophecy.

3.d. Objection 4:

Ironically, as we are seeing: in spite of the often high-handed rhetoric, plain pedantry, and oft-repeated appeals to “clear and authoritative revelation” (Buice, 2024), cessationist arguments actually *ignore* what scripture itself has to say. The conclusion that one must draw from these considerations is that cessationism’s attempt to *ban* the NT gift of prophecy (and tongues, healing, etc.) is ultimately an *arbitrary* a priori *decision and not the result of an honest exegesis of the biblical text*. Noting this is important due to cessationism’s complete exclusion of the living testimonies of literally hundreds of millions of continuationist Christians from the Day of Pentecost to this very day.

4. The NT Gift of Prophecy in Practice

As we have seen, cessationism tries - in defiance of the unity and effectiveness of scripture: to *force* the Bible to compete with itself, falsely pitting the NT gift of prophecy per se and the doctrine of scripture against one another. Paul, by contrast, teaches that the NT gift of prophecy in practice is *testable* (1Thess 5:19-21), presumably by *scripture itself*. As testable, prophetic utterances cannot coherently be held to be either *a priori* “infallible” or *a priori* illegitimate. To even suggest this is to either way ignore what Paul actually teaches on the matter. This simple issue is yet another falsification of CSA as we reviewed above. Paul further instructs that we are to “hold fast to the good” (1Thess 5:21) when assessing prophetic utterances, or separate the godly wheat from the human chaff; clearly reflecting the NT transformation and democratization of

the OT Spirit of prophecy, grounded in Christ's own prophetic office (the *munus triplex*). This is centrally important to the cessationist's *arbitrary refusal* to even consider actual testimony to the continuation of the gifts plainly evident across church history. In support of this plentiful and growing archive, I will here review the testimony of contemporary practitioners and witnesses. Here is a 1st person summary of three actual cases of the NT gift of prophecy in practice:

4a. Case 1:

After church one day in 1994, I was fellowshiping while making my way through the crowd toward the exit. Though I was surrounded by hundreds of people, a particular woman caught my attention. She was chatting with others, and there was nothing especially striking about her person or behavior that might explain why she should stand out to me in that moment. I didn't know her well: we were merely acquaintances. All of a sudden, I felt a *perceptible nudge* to talk to her as *words* simultaneously came into my spirit: "Go and tell her that I love her." The *perceptible nudge* and the *words* were concurrent and unified as the event struck me and began to unfold. Though I had often witnessed others prophesy, this was the first time something like this had ever happened to me. I'm not proud of my immediate response to God's leading: I nearly scoffed! "Of course you love her, God. You love everyone! And I know enough to know that she already knows *that*." The response was swift and curt in my spirit, I felt God say: "Trust me, and do it!" I was incredibly nervous and worried she might think me grandiose or silly. But I determined to obey the voice of the Lord. After all, there was nothing obviously wrong, biblically or morally, with the words that came to me or in my intentions in the episode. Indeed, a part of me didn't want to do it, but I did anyway. I walked up to her, and said, "Jennifer, I was walking by and I felt the Lord urge me to tell you that *He loves you...*" As the words "He loves you..." passed through my lips, the Holy Spirit perceptibly fell upon and welled-up in me. It felt like those special moments in worship or prayer, when

your whole person feels enveloped by a sense of God's manifest presence. More words *spontaneously* came from my mouth: "...and my sister he wants you to know that He *sees you* and is well pleased..." Tears welled-up in her eyes, and as I continued to speak she fiercely hugged me and began to weep profusely on my shoulder. I went on to prophesy about God's purposes for her life. Though she of course intellectually knew that God loves everyone, and her too, she evidently really needed to *hear* and *feel* that God loves and sees her, and to be reminded of his specific purposes for her life. Had I not in faith obeyed the prompting of the Holy Spirit, neither her nor I would have been blessed that day in just the way God blessed us.

4.b. Case 2:

One day in 1998 I was driving to an appointment for work. I was absorbed in the tasks of the day and not in a particularly spiritual frame of mind. While driving, I passed a church that was not in my tradition. In fact, it was a local Roman Catholic church that I had driven by many times before. As the church entered my field of vision, my focus was all of a sudden *interrupted* by a *strange feeling*, and in a flash: *words* inexplicably flooded my awareness, almost like the unfolding of a verbal movie. The moment was startling to me, and I knew that the Lord was giving me a prophetic word for that particular church. Given my Reformed background, the whole episode - both in how it happened and that it was even happening, was somewhat surprising to me. The word went something like this:

God says he is going to move among the youth in your local church in the power of the Holy Spirit, and this will cause significant controversy in corners of your congregation. I saw your young folk fervently praying together, some speaking in tongues and others prophesying: all seized by the power and presence of God. The Lord says that if you welcome this move and defend it in the face of criticism, it will not only transform

and enrich the lives of your youth, but it will also bless the entire congregation.

There were more aspects to it that I can't remember just now, but this was the crux of the word. I wrote it out in a letter to the local pastors. For accountability reasons, I gave them my name, the name of my local church, and my own pastor's phone number, in case they felt I had wrongly overstepped any boundaries. I even closed the letter by quoting John Paul II exhorting Roman Catholics to embrace the charismatic gifts. Some weeks after mailing the letter, I received a note from one of the priests thanking me. I then moved on and didn't think much more about it. That was not the end of the matter, however.

Five years later (2003), I was home from college on holiday break. I was eating lunch with friends one afternoon, and one of them got up to leave earlier than the rest of us. This actually happened: he explained that he was going to a Catholic church with one of his friends, because the Lord was moving powerfully among their youth group. "Which church?!" I exclaimed. In all truth: it was the same church I had prophesied over five years earlier. God really does speak to and through his people in living and active ways, and episodes like this show forth how and why he gives prophetic gifting to his people.

4.c. Case 3:

I was part of a ministry team serving at a prophetic conference in the UK. At the conclusion of each general session, we held open prophetic ministry so that anyone who wanted to participate could be prayed over. We worked in teams, and the teams functioned under the authority of local elders from the churches running the conference. One woman came to me and my teammate for prayer, and as we were praying I heard these words in my spirit: "*Tell her, 'God hates moms and dads.'*" I was bemused, since I don't often receive such strange

words. Clearly, God does not actually hate moms and dads. But I felt strongly urged to give the word anyway. As my partner prayed for the woman, I briefly excused myself to consult with my team leader, and on hearing the content of the word, he himself consulted with the pastor and prophetic leader in charge of the session. They, too, were bemused. After a brief discussion, they told me that they trust me and to give the word if I felt I should. So I returned to the women, rejoining my teammate. I told her, “this may sound very strange, but as we were praying I strongly felt the Lord tell me that he wants you to know: ‘*God hates moms and dads.*’” Immediately, the woman let out a *wailing scream*, fell to the ground writhing, and began manifesting what appeared to be symptoms of demonic oppression. The leaders rushed to the scene as my teammate and I prayed for her, commanding the oppression to go in Jesus’ Name. After a brief time of deliverance prayer, the woman’s senses returned. She told us all that she endured years of sexual abuse as a child, and her abuser used “moms and dads” to perversely name the evil as if it were a game. Women in leadership from the local church hosting the conference continued to minister to her, and the church helped her arrange further pastoral and professional counseling and advice on what further steps she might take.

Conclusion: Evaluating these Cases

These prophetic episodes *actually happened*. As N.T. Wright notes, “God is good. God is gracious. God can speak today through his people. But at every point we are scripturally formed Christians who must carefully discern when such words are spoken, just as we are asked to do in scripture (1Th 5:19-21).”³⁰ Can you discern anything in these cases at variance with biblical teaching or that is even *actually capable* of impugning the doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture? In Case 1, God revealed situation specific information about a woman struggling with feeling unloved and overlooked by God.

³⁰ N.T. Wright, “Pentecost: Reflections on a Gift,” *Spiritus*, forthcoming.

Nothing the prophetic person said in anyway conflicts, theologically or morally, with the economic and holistic content of revelation. Had the prophetic person quoted scripture about God's love and good plans for his people, she likely would have knowingly nodded. But would that have affected her in the same way? Perhaps, or perhaps not. The way the event unfolded didn't only relay already widely known information, but rather *picked her out* as specially loved and seen by God in the details of her own immediate life situation. This very concretely shows the biblical *purpose* of the NT gift of prophecy, namely: "upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation" (1Cor 14:3).

The second case is more interesting and perhaps somewhat controversial. The Holy Spirit revealed specific, situational revelation about his immediate plans for a local church congregation that *actually came to pass*. The particulars of the prophetic utterance are clearly in line with biblical precedents. Across scripture and church history, God periodically visits his people with a tangible sense of his manifest presence. In those moments, people's lives are transformed, enriched, and deepened in their relationship with God. This is uncontroversial. The controversial dimension of Case 2 has to do with still outstanding doctrinal differences between Protestant Evangelical and Roman Catholic churches. The prophetic person who gave this word did not herself adopt or endorse any particular thesis in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, soteriology, etc.; nor did the event presume to settle ongoing theological debates between Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. The event does show, however, that across these vitally important differences and debates, we all name the Name of Jesus. God is at work among Roman Catholic churches just as he is in Protestant Evangelical churches - both in their various imperfections, and doctrinal differences in this particular case is not of such a nature so as to place either party outside of Christian communion (indeed, one hopes that the Vatican would acknowledge this and more widely practice eucharistic hospitality). The same could be

said of the relation between continuationist and cessationist churches.

The third case is in my view the most remarkable. If the testing of prophetic utterances required wooden proof-texting in the style popular among cessationist fundamentalists, the word could have never been given (because as a rule, God does not hate moms and dads), and consequently: the victimized woman would have not been set free and began healing in the event. This case quite vividly displays the power of God and his kingdom in a way consistent with biblical witness. And notice: the NT gift of prophecy precisely has to do with the particular details of everyday life. As these three cases show, its those very details that are at issue in the practice of the NT gift of prophecy. Yet it is revelation's economic and holistic content that empowers us to *test* the content of prophetic utterances, just as Paul instructs. This clearly shows that the "revelation" that occurs in the NT gift of prophecy is not on the same plane as economic and holistic revelation. The latter tests the former, and not vice versa. As such, the cessationist critique of the NT gift of prophecy presents, with Dockery and Yarnell: a clear "*misuse*" of the doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture; with Sanders, it presents a clear case of bald *verbal reductionism*; and with Vanhoozer: presents a clear instance of the abuse of *Sola Scriptura*.

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