

## What it Means to be a Bible-believer

### AFBC Pastors and Wives' Fellowship

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By Steve Mayo

Earlier this year, Time Magazine published a list of "Ten Ideas Changing the World Right Now". To many people's surprise, Christianity – in the form of New Calvinism – made the list; ranking #3.

Listen to the article:

*If you really want to follow the development of conservative Christianity, track its musical hits. In the early 1900s you might have heard "The Old Rugged Cross," a celebration of the atonement. By the 1980s you could have shared the Jesus-is-my-buddy intimacy of "Shine, Jesus, Shine." And today, more and more top songs feature a God who is very big, while we are...well, hark the David Crowder Band: "I am full of earth/ You are heaven's worth/ I am stained with dirt/ Prone to depravity."<sup>1</sup>*

Are you familiar with this movement called "New Calvinism"? We need to be. If Time Magazine recognises its profound global influence, we need to be aware of it. The fact is that the Seeker Friendly Gospel (Hybels), the Health and Wealth Gospel (Houston, among others) and the Purpose Driven Gospel (Warren) are now dated trends. Calvin, at 500 years of age as of last month, is the new rage.

Now, before you think that this message is a warning against "New Calvinism", let me say that my intention is to use this new trend as a motive to examine ourselves. We call ourselves "Bible-believers", and we have defined our distinctive in three points:

1. A commitment to the authority and sufficiency of the Scripture; sometimes expressed as Scripture is our only rule for faith and practice.
2. An expectant hope in the imminent, pre-millennial return of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.
3. A recognition that the canon of Scripture is complete, therefore, the sign gifts that verified the apostolic message that is our New Testament have fulfilled their purpose and have ceased.

That is our distinctive. It distinguishes us from Hillsong and Charismatic churches. It distinguishes us from Anglican churches. It distinguishes us from Roman Catholicism. It distinguishes us from the Baptist Union, etc. Does it distinguish us from the New Calvinism? If so, are we correct to stand where we stand?

### New Calvinism Described

As I look at the New Calvinism, I find that there is much to admire about the movement. For one thing, authors, theologians and preachers that I respect are at the forefront of this movement – men

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779\\_1884782\\_1884760,00.htm](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.htm); accessed on 16 August 2009

like John Piper and Don Carson. Others attached to the movement include C J Mahaney, Mark Dever, Albert Mohler, and Mark Driscoll. Please understand that I don't name these men to vilify, but merely to help us understand what the New Calvinism looks like in the flesh.

I think this movement is a welcome change in many respects to the direction evangelicalism has been going in. This movement, though missional, is not emergent. A few of the characteristics that I have observed are:

**1. A belief in a big God who is sovereign and gracious.** This is an important corrective to the self-help-masquerading-as-Christianity fluff that has been dominating Christian bookstore shelves for a couple decades. The premise of those "Six Steps to a Happier You" books is an old lie from the Devil himself: You can do it yourself.

The fact of Scripture is "no you can't . . . but God can".

I think our proclamation of the gospel must speak honestly about the human condition – even though that picture is highly unflattering.

Rom 3:10-12

10 As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one;  
11 There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.  
12 They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one." (NKJ)

At the same time, our proclamation must affirm the supremacy and grace of God.

Heb 7:25

25 Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (NKJ)

In the framework of a Big God and a depraved humanity, the idea of self-help is exposed for what it actually is: self-deception and self-idolatry. I think New Calvinism has got this right . . . and I think it is a message post-moderns are willing to hear. The biblical gospel, though unflattering, is true, authentic and promises a real and secure hope – not a quick fix. It is no coincidence, then, that New Calvinism is attracting young people in droves. It offers real answers to real issues.

**2. An emphasis on expository preaching.** Because the New Calvinism affirms the authority of Scripture, expository verse-by-verse preaching is making a comeback. This is in contrast to the style of preaching commonly seen on Christian television – a theatrical and motivational performance with selective allusions to the Bible. I am glad the pendulum is swinging back to expository preaching.

**3. A return to hymnody.** You may have noticed that some of the new music being written today for congregational singing actually has theological depth to the lyrics. It is also in the structure of three or four verses and a chorus – the structure of a hymn. At our Annual Bible Conference last month, Mike and I both introduced new hymns that come from churches associated with New Calvinism.

New hymns are only half the story. Old hymns are back, too . . . and so are acoustic instruments. One of the newest CDs from Sovereign Grace Music is a recording of men singing hymns to piano-only accompaniment.<sup>2</sup> What a revolutionary idea!

On the website of another New Calvinism church, you can download MP3s of their congregational singing for your iPod. Half of the songs available are older hymns – “Grace Greater than Our Sin” and “Great is Thy Faithfulness” to name a couple.

(Now . . . this is not to say that pop music is out. It is not. Blended worship – a mixture of old and new – is the trend. Guitars and drums are the usual, but not exclusive, instrumentation. I, for one, do not have a problem with guitars and drums when they are unobtrusive in support of the congregational singing. But when people come to a particular church for the band – as has been the case in some circles – we are feeding idolatry, not genuine worship.)

I am glad hymns – both old and new – are back and that mind-numbing choruses are out.

**4. An appreciation of doctrine.** Here, too, is a welcome corrective. The trend had been to dumb down the doctrinal statement in order to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. But New Calvinism lauds doctrine and is robust in defining theology.

**5. Clarity on the unique roles of men and women.** This one, of course, takes courage. Nearly all major denominations have opened the door to female pastors. Within the New Calvinism are prominent spokesmen who are arguing for a happy acceptance of biblically-defined roles . . . and a male only clergy.

## Engaging New Calvinism with respect to the AFBC’s Distinctives

With characteristics like this, we may think the New Calvinism isn’t really new – it is what we have been all along. How good of them to join us!

But proponents of New Calvinism would never join the AFBC. Why? Because they would disagree with all three of our distinctives. Let’s return to the distinctives I named earlier. I want to very briefly tell you how New Calvinism would respond to each, and then explore whether our distinctive is valid and, if so, how we should express it.

**Distinctive 1. The Bible is authoritative and sufficient.** You will notice that this time I have phrased the distinctive “the Bible”. That is because we are *Sola Scriptura* in the purest sense. We believe the canon is closed and that God is not revealing Himself in a special way today. All we need is in the Bible.

### What is a “Bible-believing” Church?

A Bible-believing church accepts divine revelation as primary knowledge to the extent that the Bible drives beliefs and shapes behaviour.

We must be careful here because not every church that classifies itself as Bible-believing is actually Bible-believing. Let’s break down the definition:

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<sup>2</sup> “Together for the Gospel Live”, Sovereign Grace Music, 2008.

## 1. A Bible-believer looks to revelation as primary knowledge

There are various ways that something can be known. The issue is, which of these ways is primary.

**A. Reason/Research.** The Enlightenment made reason primary. Its creed was “if it can’t be verified, it can’t be believed.” Thus, science became the determiner of truth. Sadly, the Bible was critiqued on the basis of reason and research (research that was inherently incomplete) and found to be wanting.

In response, Bible-believing Christians sometimes became evidentialists – seeking to prove the Bible to be correct before proclaiming it. Whilst apologetics is a valid field of study, and the reasoning of evidentialists is helpful as an argument, it is not necessary for the Bible to be proved in order for it to be true. The Bible is true with or without verifying evidence.

**B. Experience.** Existentialism made experience primary. Its creed was “if it has happened to me, it is real.” Thus, the experience of God in the present tense became the definition of God and His working – with or without reference to the Bible. A corollary of experience as primary knowledge is, “If it works, it must be right.” This is pragmatism.

A young person said to me, “I’m going to visit various churches until I find one that works for me.” Sometimes the same thought is expressed in more spiritual terms: “I want to see what God is blessing and go with it.” This is a rather revolting view of God, and a poor way to know truth. (As if God is a mad methodologist and we are blind mice hoping to stumble upon the unique strategy God has endorsed for our moment in time. What works today will not work tomorrow – for example, how many churches are running Sunday School bus routes any more – God keeps changing His strategy.)

By its very nature, truth by experience is relative to the individual.

**C. Intuition.** The New Age Movement made intuition primary. Its creed was “if it feels good, do it.” In Christian circles, this is sometimes called “God spoke to me.”

For example, when a teacher in our church disagreed with the church’s child protection policy, she refused to cooperate. “I’ll pray about it and go with whatever God tells me.” Not surprisingly, God “told” her to violate the policy – in clear contradiction of God’s Word (Hebrews 13.17).

**D. Revelation.** Bible-believers make revelation primary. It’s a creed that says, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” As an act of grace, God specially revealed Himself to humans through the living (Jesus) and written Word (Bible). This revelation is authoritative, sufficient and inerrant.

I like how A W Tozer expressed the priority of revelation: “A Christian knows a thing to be true, not because he has tested and verified it in experience, but because God has said it.”

In summary, it is true that knowledge is gained by reason, experience and even intuition, but revelation must be primary – the uncompromising measure by which all other origins of knowledge are measured.<sup>3</sup>

So we have established the pre-eminence of revelation. But revelation must be qualified. What is revelation?

Many evangelicals hold to a broad definition of revelation. Revelation is more than the Bible. It also includes church tradition (for some) or immediate, subjective words and premonitions (for most others).

You need to understand that revelation plus is the new trend in evangelicalism. And the AFBC is on the wrong end of this trend (or right end, depending on your perspective!).

A prominent spokesman in the New Calvinism movement is outspoken about people like us.<sup>4</sup> He says we are bibliolaters – worshippers of the wrong trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Bible.<sup>5</sup>

Why this accusation? Because proponents of New Calvinism believe the gift of prophecy is still operative today.

Wayne Grudem, author of perhaps the most popular single-volume Systematic Theology being sold today and a leading theologian in New Calvinism, defines the gift of prophecy:

“it should be defined not as ‘predicting the future’, nor as ‘proclaiming a word from the Lord,’ nor as ‘powerful preaching’ – but rather as ‘telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.’” Grudem goes on to say, “prophecy occurs when a revelation from God is reported in the prophet’s own (merely human) words.”<sup>6</sup> (He says, “merely human” because he does not hold to the infallibility of the human report of spontaneous revelation from God. In other words, New Testament prophecy must be examined by the Word of God, because it may be false.)

So . . . a general characteristic of New Calvinism is an acceptance and expectancy of “spontaneous revelation”.<sup>7</sup> Does God reveal Himself spontaneously today? If so, why would this be? Is it because

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, I take exception to the oft stated premise “all truth is God’s truth”. I think this can only be true in a perfect world, and our sin-corrupted world is far from that. The problem is in who determines truth. If I, whether through reason, experience or intuition, decide something is true, does that make it God’s truth? What if I lived 700 years ago and thought the world was flat?

<sup>4</sup> The accusation from Mark Driscoll was actually directed at the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church. See [http://www.sydneyan Anglicans.net/ministry/theology/the\\_holy\\_spirit\\_according\\_to\\_jesus/](http://www.sydneyan Anglicans.net/ministry/theology/the_holy_spirit_according_to_jesus/) accessed on 12 June 2009. If Driscoll judged them to be bibliolaters, he would surely think worse of us.

<sup>5</sup> Bibliolatry was charged against Bible-believers in previous generations as well. A helpful article on the history of the Southern Baptist Convention defending itself against such a charge can be found at <http://www.baptist2baptist.net/b2barticle.asp?ID=54> accessed on 12 June 2009. This history demonstrates that there is indeed nothing new under the sun.

<sup>6</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Nottingham: Inter-varsity Press, 1994), pp. 1049-1050.

<sup>7</sup> For a summary of Grudem’s teaching on this topic, see an excellent interview posted at <http://www.challies.com/archives/interviews/tongues-signs-w-1.php> (accessed on 23 June 2009).

In response to Grudem’s interview, I offer the following:

1. Grudem makes only a veiled appeal to Scripture. His primary reason for believing what he does is pragmatism. He has experienced the subjective word of God and therefore believes it is normative for all. A

the Bible is not sufficient? If a church service includes both an immediate, present-tense Word from God reported by a prophet, and a 3000-year-old Word from God recorded in Scripture, which will people listen to more? Which will be more appealing?

Sam Waldron argues against this trend in New Calvinism:

*For instance, while I admit someone like Wayne Grudem and other reputable continuationists certainly place the Bible on a level that is superior to any kind of prophecy that they admit today, nonetheless the assumption that there is continuing prophecy begins to raise all sorts of questions, maybe not right on the surface but just below the surface, about the Bible. For instance, as I argue in the book, the very structure of Old Testament Scripture is based on the idea of the infallibility of the prophetic word. When you get continuationists arguing that at least New Testament prophets are not infallible that begins to, I think, erode the foundation for what they want to hold and that is the superiority of Scripture to any modern prophecy and its fallibility. I think they hold it but I think they are eroding some of the foundation by the distinctions they are making about one kind of prophecy verses another.*

*And certainly the whole matter of the sufficiency and finality of Scripture is tied directly in with the whole premise of my argument and that is the nature of the apostolate.<sup>8</sup>*

I agree with Waldron that the sufficiency of Scripture is eroded if we seek spontaneous revelation. I think 2 Timothy 3.15-17 should settle this issue for us.

2 Tim 3:15-17

15 and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,

17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (NKJ)

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secondary reason is historical – Richard Baxter and the Westminster confession. Scripture rates only a passing mention.

2. Grudem compares apples with oranges. That God would use a fallible Sunday school teacher to influence the course of a student’s life is not equivalent to God using a person who claims to be a prophet delivering a (possibly fallible) spontaneous declaration from God.

3. I think a distinction must be made (and maintained) between Holy Spirit-heightened awareness of needs/opportunities and a Word from the Lord. There is a difference between subjective guidance . . . which often becomes clearer as God sovereignly manages circumstances and advice over time . . . and an authoritative revelatory Word of direction.

4. I think Grudem makes a valid point that cessationism risks the extreme of dead orthodoxy. God is a person, and our relationship with Him should have a vital characteristic to it. We should pray specifically with the hope that God will intervene.

<sup>8</sup> This interview with Sam Waldron is set as a counterpoint to Grudem. Waldron represented cessationists; Grudem continuationists. The full interview can be found at:

<http://www.challies.com/archives/interviews/tongues-signs-w-1.php> (accessed 23 June 2009).

If Scripture is sufficient for salvation, for sanctification and for service, what more do we need? Isn't the Spirit of God able to use the Word of God (once for all delivered to the saints) to make a Child of God (in the full sense of the term)?<sup>9</sup>

Now . . . my main concern at this point is not the New Calvinists. My main concern is us. Are we truly Bible-believers in deed as well as in Word?

## **2. The Bible drives beliefs (or, to put it another way, a Bible-believer's orthodoxy is drawn out from the Bible)**

This implies a certain method of Bible interpretation, proclamation and application.

A. Interpretation: Historical/Grammatical Method, which seeks to interpret a text according to the understanding of the original recipients, is the method for approaching the Scripture. This is in contrast to the popular method of "Scripture means what it means to me today". The interpretation of Scripture does not change over time.

B. Proclamation: Expository preaching, which attempts to let the text speak for itself with authority.

C. Application: The Bible is used to engage with culture, answer questions and address issues.

This is a place where I fear many so-called Bible-believers are lacking. I have attended many ordination exams during the 26 years I've been in ministry. I am sorry to say that I have rarely heard a candidate answer the questions from the Bible. Most often it is, "Well, I was taught . . ." or "I think it would be . . ." What hope do our congregations have if their shepherd is either so poorly schooled in the Word that he can't bring it to bear upon the most basic questions, or, if knowledgeable in the Word, he is so doubtful of it that he quotes professors and psychologists in its place?

When a question is asked, or an issue surfaces, we ought to be able to take people to the Bible and read what our all-knowing and all-sufficient God says about it.

I think it is a dangerous trend that religious talk radio is now the domain of psychologists – as if pastors and theologians have no qualification to speak about real life issues. Does this not illustrate the point that evangelicals have departed from Sola Scriptura?

What is scary is that if our pastors are so weak on applying the authoritative and all-sufficient Word to life, our congregation is worse. I regularly hear people in my own congregation justify their actions on the basis of rationalisations or feelings. Sometimes they even throw God's name into it . . . "I just felt God was telling me this was okay."

In contrast, consider the way Jesus answered questions and addressed issues – he quoted the Bible!

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<sup>9</sup> I don't want to overstate the point. Does the Holy Spirit heighten awareness so that a believer is prompted to meet a need or speak a timely word? Yes, I believe He does. But this is not prophecy. Prophecy must be uniformly defined, and it clearly meant an authoritative word from the Lord in the Old Testament.

Luke 24:27

27 And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (NKJ)

Even when tempted by the Devil, Jesus did not invoke His divine authority – He used the authoritative Word:

Matt 4:3-4

3 Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."

4 But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" (NKJ)

The same can be easily demonstrated of Paul, Peter, John, the writer of Hebrews, etc. One of the most prominent features of the New Testament is its use of the Old. Why reference the Old Testament when it would be easier to start fresh with new revelation that was spontaneous in Jesus?

### **3. The Bible shapes behaviour (or, to put it another way, a Bible-believer's orthopraxy is dictated by the Bible)**

The Bible sets out a very specific and revolutionary moral ethic. It is not just murder that is prohibited; it is also spiteful thoughts. It is not just adultery that is prohibited; it is also lustful thoughts. (See Matthew 5-7 for the ethical standards of Christ's kingdom.)

To say that we are Bible-believer's while we also harbour a critical spirit or unleash a sharp tongue or indulge wandering eyes is contradictory and hypocritical.

A Bible-believing church should be recognised, therefore, by how it behaves. It should be to the world a glimpse of the kingdom of Christ itself – genuine in love, marked by unity and faultless in purity. Is this the character of our churches? If it isn't, we aren't truly Bible-believing.

## **Distinctive 2. An expectancy of the imminent, pre-millennial return of Christ**

New Calvinism – true to its roots – tends to be a millennial. If you read theology books, you will discover that on the academic level, pre-millennialism is becoming more and more marginalised.

Perhaps the best selling **Left Behind** books did pre-millennialism a disservice. I'm not saying there is anything wrong with the books, per se, but when a movement's most visible representation is a novel, it does tend to lose academic credibility.

But what does the Scripture teach? Do we not find in Scripture a distinction between Israel and the Church? Isn't this the point of Romans 11?

Rom 11:1-5

1 I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.

2 God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the  
Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying,  
3 "Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and  
they seek my life"?

4 But what does the divine response say to him? "I have reserved for Myself seven thousand  
men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

5 Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.  
(NKJ)

In the book of Revelation, the 144 000 are categorised according to the tribes of Israel. It makes no sense, in light of numerous Old Testament assurances to ethnic Israel, to interpret this as either the first century church, or a veiled description of the present day church. The plain sense makes sense: this is Israel.

Recent a millennial theologies admit to tension in their interpretation of Romans 11 and passages such as I've referenced in Revelation (7.1-10). Without disavowing their eschatology, they admit that God must focus on ethnic Israel at some point in the future.<sup>10</sup>

Again, my main concern is whether or not our deeds match our words. It is one thing to be pre-millennial in doctrine, but another to be pre-millennial in practice.

If we truly believe in the imminent return of our Lord, then our lives and ministry will be marked by a high level of motivation to be ready.

### 1. Urgency

Expectancy is the antithesis of complacency. It is repeatedly emphasised in the New Testament that time is short, therefore, life must be lived with a sense of urgency.

Rom 13:10-11

10 Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.  
11 And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. (NKJ)

Readiness means having an unwavering focus on those things which matter for eternity. Love is chief among these – as Paul states in the passage above. Evangelism is another.

### 2. Purity

Readiness also means an acute awareness of accountability. When Christ comes, we will give an account. Therefore, we are highly motivated to live righteously so as not to be ashamed.

Paul continues with this theme in Romans 13.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, New Testament Theology, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 342. Grudem, a New Calvinist, nevertheless advocates "historic premillennialism" (Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 1127)

Rom 13:12-14

12 The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.

13 Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy.

14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lusts. (NKJ)

### 3. Cessation of Sign Gifts

I was representing the Asia Baptist Theological Seminary at a Christian conference a few years ago. Between sessions, I was approached by two pastors who asked me a question that made me feel stupid and out of date. They asked, “Is this seminary cessationist?”

Now, I could only guess what they meant – and I guessed right. They were asking about the sign gifts (prophecy, tongues, miracles, healing). Those who believe the sign gifts for today are called continuationists. Those who believe the sign gifts are not for today are labelled cessationists. New Calvinists are continuationists (as are Sydney Anglicans).<sup>11</sup>

I don’t like the term “cessationist” – it implies anti-Holy Spirit, and I am not anti-Holy Spirit. I believe this is the age of the Spirit . . . and it is clear the Spirit has not ceased, but is making remarkable changes in lives and in our world.

He has not ceased to convict the world of sin . . .

He has not ceased to convict the world of judgement . . .

He has not ceased to convict the world of righteousness . . .

He has not ceased to save sinners . . .

He has not ceased to sanctify saints . . .

He has not ceased to illumine God’s Word . . .

He has not ceased to guide and equip . . .

He has not ceased to restrain evil . . .

No, I do not believe we have the wrong trinity (to answer an earlier accusation). We believe in the Holy Spirit; we depend upon the Holy Spirit; and we celebrate and anticipate the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our ministries.

Regarding the sign gifts, however, I think Scripture is clear about their purpose, and I think it is equally clear that this purpose has been fulfilled.

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<sup>11</sup> See the Phillip Jensen interview referenced previously

Heb 2:3-4

3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him,  
4 God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will? (NKJ)

God authenticated the introduction of the New Testament message with signs and wonders. This was the message that was announced first by Jesus Christ, and then by the apostles (“those who heard Him”).

In this context, I think Sam Waldron makes a good point when he links the sign gifts to the apostolic age.

*All I’m saying is that the assumption you have in many charismatics that the church ought to be just like the apostolic church - that’s a very attractive assumption in many respects - has a fatal flaw in it because the Bible is clear and most charismatics admit that there are not Apostles of Christ today.<sup>12</sup>*

If, as Waldron argues, there are no longer apostles today – and the apostles were foundational to the church (Eph 2.20) and once the foundation was laid, apostles were no longer needed – then the sign gifts that were functioning in the age of the apostles would cease with them.

This is a point that even New Calvinists concede.<sup>13</sup> They have to – because it is biblical.

1 Cor 15:3-9

3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,  
4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,  
5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.  
6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.  
7 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.  
8 Then **last of all He was seen by me** also, as by one born out of due time.  
9 For **I am the least of the apostles**, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (NKJ, emphasis added)

Paul classifies himself, then, as the end of the apostles. The apostolic age – which included the sign gifts that verified the revolutionary message of the New Testament – has ended.

Just to be clear, New Calvinists are also called Reformed Charismatics. I’ve already mentioned prophecy – tongues and healings, too, are practiced by New Calvinists.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Waldron interview

<sup>13</sup> Schreiner, p. 724.

<sup>14</sup> Schreiner, p. 723. It is interesting that Schreiner interprets all tongue-speaking in the New Testament to be known languages, and then applies this to today by saying contemporary tongues must be languages. If this is true, then contemporary tongues can be verified . . . but they aren’t. I agree with Schreiner’s interpretation, but I think it renders his application dubious.

(Some of you are thinking like me that “Reformed Charismatic” is an oxymoron. How can you be reformed in doctrine but charismatic in practice? The two are poles apart on the theological spectrum. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy cannot be separated.)

Once again, I think we must examine our own practice. Are we minimising the work of the Spirit? This is a temptation we must resist. Are we becoming protectionistic – instilling a dead orthodoxy in our churches?

In saying that we believe the sign gifts have ceased, we must emphasise the positive – affirming that God the Holy Spirit is working in extraordinary ways today. If we truly believe in the ministry of the Spirit as defined in Scripture, then our faith will be dynamic, not static. Our churches will be birthing centres, and the unity of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit will be evident to all.

Again, I dislike the term “cessationist”. I believe God is free to do as He wishes, and that He can and does work in ways that are contrary to nature and human expectations. If, for example, God wants to miraculously heal a person, He can – and so we are right to pray for healing.

But if God heals, it would not be for the purpose of authenticating the New Testament. That purpose has been achieved . . . and is now sufficiently sustained by the personal testimonies of multiplied thousands of people who have been saved. My dispute is not with God’s ability to do something unique or miraculous; it is with the idea that He is pledged to do so in response to our call.

I do not accept, therefore, that sign gifts are the key to successful evangelism – for if people did not accept the sign of Jesus rising from the dead, they will be no more persuaded by tongues. I do believe, however, that every day the Holy Spirit draws sinners to repent and be saved. In our evangelism, we are right to depend upon the Spirit.

Neither do I accept that sign gifts are to be sought as a means to greater sanctification. I do believe, however, that it is our duty to submit to the Spirit’s sanctifying work as He illumines our understanding of God’s Word by applying it to our life. We should also seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit so that our hearts will overflow with praise to God, and with words that edify believers.

May our churches be known not so much by what we stand against, but by what we stand for . . . and, most importantly, Who it is that makes us stand.

Let me close by saying why I think it is important to affirm that we are Bible-believers:

- A. Because the Bible is God’s Word and every person is accountable to it. Truth is not negotiable. Nor is it individually-defined.
- B. Because the Bible is the basis for faith.
- C. Because our people, like sheep, are prone to wander. New Calvinism will appeal to some of our people. We must affirm what is positive about the movement, while also speaking with clarity about the differences.

Trends in Christianity come and go, but the Word of the Lord endures forever. That’s why we must be Bible-believers in word and in deed.