

The Silence of the Spirit

A Critique of the Cessationist View of the Canon

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Most evangelical Christians would agree that the Bible is uniquely authoritative. But why do we consider it to have this unique authority? In this paper I will examine one explanation for the unique authority of the Bible which has often been given, that of the cessationists. I will briefly account for the development of cessationism, explain why I find it untenable, and then offer an explanation for why it once seemed so attractive to evangelical theologians.

Cessationism: Two extended periods of silence

Most Christians maintain that the Bible, that is to say the Old and New Testaments, are uniquely authoritative because they are uniquely inspired by God. If you press the matter further, some evangelicals explain that during certain periods of time the Holy Spirit spoke words of God to prophets and apostles who wrote them down. The people of God recognized these words as inspired, and accepted them as Holy Scripture. But then, they would add, the Spirit ceased to reveal new doctrine to prophets. These theologians present the New Testament as though it was preceded and followed by periods of extended divine silence. The composition of the New Testament was preceded by four centuries of (relative) silence, and once the last part of the New Testament had been written, or once the Church through the guidance of the Spirit had deter-

mined which Christian writings were the words of God and thereby established the Biblical canon, the Spirit ceased revealing any new doctrines. This doctrine is referred to as cessationism, and it has been used as an explanation for why Protestant churches do not recognize any texts composed between the days of Malachi and Jesus as authoritative, and why, of all texts that have been written by Christians, only those included in the New Testament are authoritative.

Many Christian theologians have claimed that the Holy Spirit ceased speaking through prophets among the Jewish people approximately four hundred years before the birth of Christ. One of the clearest expressions of this conviction is found in *On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture* by Bishop Christopher Wordsworth (1807-1885), who defends Protestant exclusion of the Old Testament apocrypha by appealing to the silence of the Spirit:

The Jews have always affirmed that the prophetic Spirit *ceased* with the times of Ezra. Be it observed, also, that the Apocryphal Books do not *profess* to be inspired, as the Canonical Books do; indeed, they expressly *disclaim* all pretensions to Inspiration; they affirm that the Prophetical Spirit was not continued to the time at which they were written; they assert it has *ceased*, and they express

a hope and belief that it will be afterwards *restored*.¹

Wordsworth maintains that Ezra made the final compilation of the Old Testament canon, including in it the prophecies uttered by his contemporaries Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi who were the last of the prophets (and whose books come last in the Protestant Old Testaments). This accounts for Protestant exclusion of the apocrypha from their canon. The Old Testament apocrypha could not have been inspired by God, because God was not in the business of inspiring Scripture when those works were authored. 'It appears to be unquestionable, that Ezra, assisted (as it would seem) by the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi... revised the copies then extant of the Jewish Scriptures, and collected them into one volume, and completed the canon of the Old Testament'.²

Many modern theologians have similar convictions (even though most are presumably aware that the Hebrew Scriptures in synagogues even today are read not out of a single volume but out of various scrolls and books). For example, the evangelical systematic theologian Wayne Grudem holds to the view that 'after approximately 430 B.C., no more writings were added to the Old Testament canon'.³

The last verses of the last book in the Protestant Old Testament, Malachi, refer to the prophet Elijah who was to come again,⁴ and the New Testament begins by speaking of John the Baptist, who is identified as in some sense being the Elijah who was to come (Mt. 11.10; Lk. 1.17). According to a traditional Christian cessa-

tionist view, the centuries-long silence after Malachi was first broken by John the Baptist. The four hundred years that were thought to come between Malachi and John were clearly of no significance, and have largely been ignored by many evangelicals. That God should have been silent for four hundred years did not seem odd to them. God himself broke the silence when he felt the time was right.

With John the Baptist, a new era of revelation began, the apostolic age. It was during this relatively brief period that the books of the New Testament were authored, and the Holy Spirit signaled his presence by working miracles through the apostles. Benjamin Warfield (1851-1921), a Calvinist theologian based at Princeton Theological Seminary, is perhaps the theologian who most clearly expresses the difference between the apostolic age and the period of relative silence which followed. His view of Scripture has been analysed extensively by Pentecostal scholar Jon Ruthven; I will summarize it here.⁵ The dominant view among Anglican theologians at the time Warfield wrote was that miracles gradually became increasingly rare as the centuries went, and finally ceased at about the same time as Christianity became an accepted religion in the Roman Empire. They explained their cessation by saying either that they were no longer necessary (perhaps implying that now state force could take care of persuading) or that the church was too corrupt for the Spirit to operate.⁶ Warfield was convinced, however, that miracles must have ceased much earlier. In *Counterfeit Miracles* (originally published in 1918) Warfield argued that the charismata ceased at the close of the apostolic age.⁷ Warfield argues that the charismata were given by God to prove to people that he was the source of the revelation that they accompanied. Miracles

¹ Chr. Wordsworth, *On the Inspiration of Scripture, or, On the Canon of the Old and New Testament, and on the Apocrypha: twelve lectures, delivered before the University of Cambridge* (1854), 60.

² Wordsworth, 37.

³ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Revised edition). (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2000), 240.

⁴ 'Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse'. (Mal. 4.5-6, NRSV).

⁵ Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: the Protestant Polemic on Post-Biblical Miracles* (Tulsa: Word & Spirit Press, 2011).

⁶ Benjamin Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972 (1918)), 21: 'When the protection of the strongest power on earth was secured, the idea seems to be, the power of God was no longer needed'. See also Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 8.

⁷ Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 6.

belong to revelation periods, and appear only when God is speaking to His people through accredited messengers, declaring his gracious purposes. Their abundant display in the Apostolic Church is the mark of the richness of the Apostolic age in revelation; and when this revelation period closed, the period of miracle-working had passed by also, as a mere matter of course.⁸

He specifies that these supernatural gifts

were not the possession of the primitive Christian as such; nor for that matter of the Apostolic Church or the Apostolic age for themselves; they were distinctly the authentication of the Apostles.⁹

For Warfield, an apostle is primarily an author of authoritative scripture, and he maintains that the books of the New Testament were all either written by apostles or authorized by them.¹⁰ In his view, the Spirit revealed new truths about God and his will for man to a select group of people during Jesus' earthly life and for a limited period of time thereafter. God revealed new doctrine to Paul and the other apostles that would be binding on his body the Church, forever. To show the people that their teaching was reliable, God worked miracles through the apostles. Their teachings were then compiled and form what is today the New Testament.

After the last of the students of the apostles died, the apostolic age came to an end. After this apostolic age the Holy Spirit no longer revealed any new doctrines, that is to say there has been no more public revelation, divinely inspired messages intended for the Church as a whole. God had revealed as much as was necessary for man's salvation, and when this information had been written down and compiled into the Holy Scriptures, prophecies ceased along with other gifts of the Spirit, as they now had no necessary function. God continued speaking to his people but now he did so through the canonical Scrip-

⁸ Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 26.

⁹ Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 6.

¹⁰ Warfield 1892, reprinted in SG Craig, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 1959.416: 'The authority of the apostles, as by divine appointment founders of the Church, was embodied in whatever books they imposed on the Church as law, not merely in those they themselves had written'.

tures, interpreted under the guidance of the Spirit, rather than through apostles or charismatic prophets. Warfield grants that God could have chosen to reveal himself continually to each person all through history, but that he didn't do so. Rather God

has chosen... to give to this [human] race His complete revelation of Himself in an organic whole. And when the historic process of organic revelation had reached its completeness, and when the whole knowledge of God designed for the saving health of the world had been incorporated into the living body of the world's thought – there remained, of course, no further revelation to be made.¹¹

Warfield is aware that in the Church reports of miracles occurring actually increase over the centuries.¹² For his thesis to hold, he must prove these accounts wrong. This he attempts to do. He notes that Justin Martyr and Irenaeus claimed that miracles still occurred, but he writes that they give no concrete examples of any healings they themselves witnessed.¹³ He notes that later Christian pseudepigrapha such as the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles are full of references to miraculous healings, and suggests that this miracle literature is a borrowing from pagan religiosity.¹⁴ He questions the authenticity of miracles referred to by Augustine, Athanasius, Chrysostom and many other Church Fathers; he rejects miraculous claims by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages as well as later, by the proto-Pentecostal Irvingites, by Adoniram Judson Gordon (Baptist minister and author of *The Ministry of Healing*), and by Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science.

While Warfield's criticism of purported miracles is often convincing, and while a degree of skepticism when it comes to reports of the miraculous is always healthy, I am of the impression that his agenda determines his conclusions. If we accept Warfield's claim that miracles and revelation go hand in hand, and if it could be shown that there have been no miracles since

¹¹ Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 26.

¹² Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 10.

¹³ Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 11.

¹⁴ Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 16.

apostolic times, his contention that there has been no revelation either would seem plausible. But it is not so obvious that revelation must be accompanied by miracles.

One might ask why it seemed important for Warfield to disprove post-apostolic miracles and the possibility of continued revelation. As Ruthven shows, that explanation is to be found in a tradition that is well-established in Anglo-American Protestantism.

A Short History of Cessationism

Not all Christians are cessationists. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, teaches that the age of wonders never ceased. Miracles continue to occur, and people continue to receive revelation from God. Protestants since Calvin's time have tended to discount Roman Catholic miracle reports, however. Benjamin Warfield based his cessationist teachings on his predecessor Charles Hodge (1797-1878), Dutch reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), and Conyers Middleton (1683-1750), among others. In his *Systematic Theology* Charles Hodge wrote, 'It is true that during the apostolic age there were occasional communications made to a class of persons called prophets. But this "gift of prophecy", that is, the gift of speaking under the inspiration of the Spirit, was analogous to the gift of miracles. The one has ceased as obviously as the other.'¹⁵ Hodge wrote these words in defense of what he considered to be orthodox Calvinist teaching in response to Roman Catholics and Quakers.¹⁶ Hodge's views were widely shared. For example, G.L. Stone published in 1855 *Testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of Prophecy; or, All pure prophecy terminated in the advent of Christ*

and the establishment of Christianity.¹⁷ In teaching that miracles have ceased, Warfield, Hodge, and Stone are representative of American, English and Scottish Reformed traditions that are based on the Westminster Confession; Mullin notes that 'the formal rejection of contemporary miracles became an intellectual axiom for English-speaking Protestants'.¹⁸ The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) clearly teaches that there can be no new revelations of God's will. The Confession begins,

1.1 Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.¹⁹

The Westminster Confession thus referred to the silence of the Spirit to explain why the canon is closed; in contrast the Thirty-nine articles of the Church of England (1563) based its Biblical canon on Church tradition ('Those Canonical books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church'). The question is on what basis the authors of the Westminster Confession made their claim.

¹⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology in three volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) vol. 1, 98.

¹⁶ While Hodge may have been more doctrinaire in his rejection of miracles than other Calvinist theologians, he would not have considered himself in any way an innovator. Dorrien writes, 'Near the end of his career, Hodge boasted that no theological novelty was ever taught during his fifty-plus years at Princeton'. (Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox 1998), 26)

¹⁷ G.L. Stone, *Testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of Prophecy*. (London: Whittaker & Co., 1855) Stone based his thesis on an interpretation of Daniel.

¹⁸ Robert Bruce Mullin, 'Horace Bushnell and the Question of Miracles', *Church History* 58 (1989), 461.

¹⁹ The first statement on Scripture of the Congregationalist Savoy Declaration (1658) is identical to this section of the Westminster Confession, and the Second London Baptist Confession (1689) also has the same cessationist teaching.

John Smith (1616-1652), who was contemporary with the writers of the Westminster Confession, clearly articulated a cessationist stand on Scripture in his *Select Discourses*, basing it on readings in Scripture, Church history, and significantly, on rabbinical literature. Smith argues that the prophetic spirit ceased in both 'the Jewish and the Christian church'. He reviews early Christian authors, and finds that Clement of Alexandria was the first to say that prophecy concluded with Malachi.²⁰ It is mainly on the basis of rabbinic sources that Smith argues for cessation of prophecy in Ezra's day. Smith rejects the notion that the Spirit of prophecy left the Church immediately after the completion of the Revelation of John, but he argues that the spirit of prophecy 'overlived St. John's time but a little'.²¹ It is not unlikely that the authors of the Westminster Confession likewise were acquainted with Smith's writings and the rabbinical traditions to which he refers.

But the roots of cessationism go further back still. Milne shows that Anglican theologian William Whitaker (1547-1597) inspired the authors of the Westminster Confession.²² Whitaker defended the Reformed faith against the Roman Catholic theologians Thomas Stapleton and Robert Bellarmine and the restorationist followers of Schwenkfeld.²³ Like many theologians before and after him, Whitaker assumed a period of silence between the time of Malachi and John the Baptist. He maintained that the Old Testament apocrypha did not belong to Scripture, as they were not written by prophets, the last of the Hebrew prophets having been Malachi. Whitaker writes, 'all confess that Malachi was the last

prophet of the Jews, between whom and John the Baptist no prophet whatever intervened'.²⁴ The fact that 'the Israelitish church' had not received the apocrypha was in his mind a central argument against their inclusion in Scripture, for 'before Christ there was no other church than that of the Jews'.²⁵ Whitaker supports his restriction of the canon to those books accepted as canonical by Jews by referring to several Church Fathers, including Jerome. But contrary to the Catholic teachers, Whitaker seems to assume that just as the Spirit grew silent after Malachi, so too did it grow silent in the Christian church; 'God does not teach us now by visions, dreams, revelations, oracles as of old, but by the scriptures alone'.²⁶

English-speaking cessationists of the Reformed tradition often appeal to John Calvin (1509-1564). It is not clear that Calvin believed that spiritual gifts had completely ceased, or whether they had merely become rare;²⁷ quotes supporting both interpretations may be found. In the following passage in the *Institutes*, it may seem that Calvin affirms the possibility of there still being prophets:

Those who preside over the government of the church in accordance with Christ's institutions are called by Paul as follows: first apostles, then prophets, thirdly evangelists, fourthly pastors, and finally teachers. [Eph. 4.11] Of these only the last two have an ordinary office in the church; the Lord raised up the first three at the beginning of his kingdom, and now and again revives them as the need of times demands.²⁸

Milne rejects this interpretation, however: 'It would be a thorough misunderstanding of Calvin to assume he means that the office of prophet, with its capacity to deliver extraordinary, extra-

²⁰ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, (Cambridge UP, 1859) Discourse VI, On Prophecy, Chapter XII. Smith's later editor Williams (1859, 279) notes that Smith misinterpreted Clement of Alexandria on this point.

²¹ Smith, 282.

²² Garnet Howard Milne, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Cessation of Special Revelation: The Majority Puritan Viewpoint on whether Extra-Biblical Prophecy is still Possible*. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007), p. 53. See William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture: Against the Papists especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*. (Cambridge UP, 1849).

²³ Milne, 53, 54

²⁴ Whitaker, 51. (First controversy, Question the First, chapter 5)

²⁵ Whitaker, 53

²⁶ Whitaker, 521 (The First Controversy, Question the Sixth, chapter 8). Also quoted in Milne, , 54. Whitaker does not argue for the truth of this statement, but takes it for granted.

²⁷ John Goldingay writes that Calvin's 'successors went further in declaring that scripture alone was inspired'. John Goldingay *Models for Scripture*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/ Paternoster, 1994 (1987)). 258.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.3.4 McNeill, ed., 1960, 1056

biblical revelations, might be revived'.²⁹ Calvin rejected claims of his contemporaries to new revelations, but as Milne shows, he was not so much troubled by the newness of the purported revelations, but that they were valued over Scripture and contradicted Scripture. The Spirit cannot contradict Scripture because 'he is the Author of the Scriptures: he cannot vary and differ from himself'.³⁰ Calvin explains,

'Therefore the Spirit, promised to us, has not the task of inventing new and unheard-of revelations, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the gospel'.³¹

No Cessationism in the Early Church

Theologians in the Reformed tradition have taught that the Spirit ceased to reveal doctrine to the people of Israel after Malachi, and then after speaking to the John the Baptist, Jesus and the apostles, the Spirit again stopped revealing doctrine. But despite rabbinic and Pharisaic claims that the Spirit had grown silent in the beginning of the Hellenistic era, there is also considerable evidence that many in Jesus' time believed the Spirit still inspired prophecy. The New Testament allows for individual cases of prophecy even before John. For example, John's father, Zechariah prophesied through the Holy Spirit that his son would be a prophet (Lk. 1.67), and Anna the daughter of Phaniel is described as a prophet (Lk. 2.36) -- and there is no suggestion that she was the first one to appear in several hundred years. While John is described as the prophet that the Lord, through Malachi, had promised to send (Mt. 11.10; Lk. 1.17), that does not mean there could be no prophets before him. John takes it for granted that in his capacity as

high priest, Caiaphas could make prophetic utterances (Jn. 11.51). There is no suggestion that this is something high priests began doing only after John the Baptist began his prophetic career.

Ruthven shows that there is little evidence in patristic literature that Church leaders believed that the Spirit had grown silent. Justin Martyr and Origen, two early Christian writers, likewise do not claim that the Spirit had ceased speaking through the prophets in the time before John; rather they present John as the last in a long series of Jews through whom the Holy Spirit spoke. In their opinion, the Spirit ceased speaking to Jewish prophets only after the Jewish people had rejected Christ.³² Justin Martyr does not seem to have believed that there ever was a time when God's Spirit was silent. Rather he claims that the Jews had a continuous succession of prophets down to the time of Jesus, after whose death the gift of prophecy was transferred to the Christian church where it still abides.³³ He considers John the Baptist the last of the Jewish prophets.

Wesley and the Pentecostals considered Montanists 'to be the last charismatic remnant of primitive Christianity before it was overwhelmed by the cold ritualism of Catholic orthodoxy'.³⁴ But their view is historically inaccurate; Shogren points out that Christians did not immediately question the sincerity of the Montanist prophets because, as Eusebius explains, prophecy was still common in many Christian

³² Origen (*Against Celsus* 7.8) 'In more recent times, since the coming of Christ, no prophets have arisen among the Jews, who have confessedly been abandoned by the Holy Spirit on account of their impiety towards God, and towards Him of whom their prophets spoke'. (Quoted in Gary S. Shogren, 'Christian Prophecy and Canon in the 2nd Century: A Response to B.B. Warfield', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. 40 (1997), 625).

³³ "You should realize from the fact that among us Christians the charisms of prophecy exist down to the present day that the gifts that previously resided among your people have now been transferred to us." Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* § 128, Thomas B. Falls, trans., (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America 2003), 128. See also *Dialogue with Trypho* § 52, 79.

³⁴ Clarke Garrett, *Origins of the Shakers: From the Old World to the New World*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 9.

²⁹ Milne, 46.

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 1.9.2, 94-95. Milne (45) explains that Calvin 'associated claims to new revelation with a violation of the unity which joins the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit'.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 1.9.1., 94, also quoted in Milne, 45-46. See also 'The Prefatory Address to King Francis', *Institutes*, 16-17.

congregations at the time. The Montanists were criticized by their Catholic contemporaries not because they claimed to prophesy, but because they claimed that after them prophecy would cease.³⁵

In short, the belief that the Spirit ceased to speak directly to members of the church after the last of the apostles died was not shared by Christians writing in the century following the passing of the first apostolic generation.

Ultimately Reformed cessationism seems to be based on rabbinical cessationism

In support of his view that the Old Testament canon was closed at ‘approximately 430 B.C.’, Wayne Grudem referred to the rabbinic doctrine of the silence of the Spirit.³⁶ Wordsworth did the same in 1854. Indeed, the Protestant conviction that the Spirit had been silent for hundreds of years prior to John the Baptist seems to ultimately have its origin in rabbinical theology, rather than in the tradition reflected by the New Testament or the Church Fathers.³⁷ The Talmud teaches that the prophetic Spirit left Israel after Malachi and before the beginning of the Hellenistic era:

b. Sanh. 11a ‘The tannaitic rabbis taught: From the time that the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malaki, died, the holy spirit has withdrawn from Israel’.³⁸

S. Olam Rab. 86b ‘Alexander of Macedonia reigned for twelve years. Until that time prophets spoke prophecies through the holy spirit; from that time on, “Incline your ears and listen to the Sages”’.³⁹

³⁵ Shogren, 616.

³⁶ Grudem, 240.

³⁷ Cf. Ruthven, 12. Ruthven argues that cessationism can also be traced to paganism and Christian sects of the first three centuries as well.

³⁸ Quoted in Benjamin D. Sommer, ‘Did Prophecy Cease? Evaluating a Reevaluation’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996), 33.

³⁹ Quoted in Sommer, 34.

By saying that the Holy Spirit had withdrawn, the rabbis implied that God no longer spoke to his people through prophets.⁴⁰ It is debated when the doctrine of the silence of the Spirit was first developed within Judaism. Some have suggested it is found already in 1 Macc. 4.44-46; 9.27; 14.41.⁴¹ Another text which suggests that the doctrine of the silence of the Spirit was established during the Maccabean period is Ps. 74.9, ‘We are given no miraculous signs, no prophets are left’ (NIV).⁴² Others suggest the doctrine is older still.⁴³ Regardless of when the doctrine of the silence of the Spirit was first formulated, it seems to have been used by the Scribes or Levites to secure their position. If there can be no new prophets, if God does not speak directly to his people, then one can only know God’s will by interpreting the prophecies that he had already given. And it was the Scribes or Levites who had a monopoly on the interpretation of Scripture.⁴⁴ They therefore took over the authority of the prophets.

⁴⁰ Aune explains, ‘In Rabbinic Judaism the “holy spirit” was virtually synonymous with prophecy’. David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 104.

⁴¹ Aune, 105.

⁴² Aune (105) writes, ‘This psalm is often thought to have originated during the Maccabean period and to reflect the Seleucid capture of the temple (Ps. 74.3-4). Yet it may reflect the situation which attended the destruction of the Solomon temple in 586 B.C. when the temple prophets may have lost a great deal of their credibility.’

⁴³ Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, (Harvard University Press, 2007), 229: ‘the publication [in the third century B.C.E.] of the Minor Prophets in one book – physically a scroll – amounted to a declaration by the scribes that the era of prophecy had come to an end’.

⁴⁴ ‘Through the doctrines of the Mosaic succession and the departure of the spirit of prophecy, the scribes claimed... a monopoly on religious instruction’ (Toorn, 207). So also Aune (104): ‘Since the sages did not consider themselves inspired spokesmen for divine revelations but rather traditionalists, the view that prophecy had ceased was a means of legitimating their role as successors of Moses and the prophets’.

The edge of the doctrine lay in the rejection of claims of inspiration by people from the post-prophetic era. The scribal establishment of Jerusalem attempted to secure its moral leadership by disqualifying contemporaneous visionaries and ecstasies as empty chatterboxes; the real prophets were the Books of the Prophets, to whose inspiration the scribes held the keys.⁴⁵

This doctrine explains why works that are obviously later than Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi were not included in the Jewish canon, works such as Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon.⁴⁶ Critical scholars today consider it likely that the Book of Daniel is later than these three minor prophets, but it was presumably included in the canon because of its claim to have been composed during the Babylonian exile (Dan. 1.1).⁴⁷ The doctrine of the silence of the Spirit explains why the Jewish apocalyptic literature is largely pseudepigraphic; that is why their authors use the names of known prophets such as Enoch and Daniel. They have to give an explanation for the origin of the work and defend its inspiration.⁴⁸

The belief that the Spirit was silent was widespread shortly before Jesus' time, even among members of the Qumran community. The very fact that the Essenes wrote commentaries on the prophets shows that these prophetic texts were more authoritative than their own compositions.⁴⁹ Like other Jews of their time, the Es-

senes also expected the arrival of 'the prophet' together with the Messiah(s) (1QS 9.11), that is, the person referred to in Malachi and Deut. 18.18.⁵⁰ On the other hand, the Essenes did also have their own writings, which they seemed to have treated as though they were divinely inspired. Sommer claims that the conviction that the Spirit had left the people was widely spread among Jews in the Hellenistic era, but that a change occurred in the decades prior to the destruction of the Temple.⁵¹ There was at this time according to Josephus a widely held expectation that the end times were nigh, that the Messiah would soon come, and there were many who prophesied the fall of Jerusalem.⁵² Many believed that God would send his Holy Spirit shortly before the arrival of the Messiah, and it was in accordance with this expectation that new prophecies could be uttered and welcomed as divinely inspired (cf. Mal. 4.5-6). But after the fall of the Temple, various Jewish writers again spoke of the Spirit leaving the people, as in the following quote from 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 85.1,3:

In former times, even in the generations of old, our fathers had helpers, righteous men and holy prophets.... But now the righteous have been gathered, and the prophets have fallen asleep. We also have gone forth from the land, and Zion has been taken away from us, and we have nothing now except the Mighty One and his Law.⁵³

⁴⁵ Toorn, 263.

⁴⁶ But see Aune (106): 'The formation of the OT canon ... appears to have had no connection with the view that prophecy had ended in Judaism'.

⁴⁷ On the dating of Daniel, see John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 29-33.

⁴⁸ This does not necessarily mean that these works were not in fact divinely inspired; but if people in general are convinced that God no longer communicated prophecies, it would not be wise to claim to have received a prophecy. Compare John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*. Second edition. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1998), 40 regarding the use of pseudonymity in the apocalypses: 'the effectiveness of the device presupposes the credulity of the masses'.

⁴⁹ Toorn, 263: 'There is no evidence that people at Qumran rejected the doctrine of the prophetic era; on the contrary, the practice of scriptural commentary,

extant in the so-called *pesharim*, implies that the community recognized the special character of the ancestral books'.

⁵⁰ 'They should not depart from any counsel of the law in order to walk in complete stubbornness of their heart, but instead shall be ruled by the first directives which the men of the Community began to be taught until the prophet comes, and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel'. (Florentino García Martínez & Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*. (Leiden: Brill.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 91, 93.

⁵¹ Sommer, 37.

⁵² Such as Jesus son of Ananus/ Joshua ben Ananias in AD 62, according to Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 6.5.3.

⁵³ Quoted in Lane William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*. (Word Biblical Commentary 47a), (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), 10

Mark's account of an interchange between Jesus and the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders suggests that these Jewish authorities already in Jesus' time assumed that the Spirit no longer inspired prophets. Jesus asks, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me." They argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'Of human origin?'" – they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet' (Mk. 11.30-32, NRSV). If Mark is historically reliable on this point, the Jewish religious establishment of Jesus' time, unlike the common people, did not believe that John and Jesus were true prophets. In their opinion, God still spoke to his people, but through his Word as interpreted by the scholars. At the same time, the masses seem to have been persuaded that John was a real prophet. Apparently two contradictory doctrines flourished among Jews at the same time, just as they have done later in Christianity.

Scribes may have originally advanced the doctrine of the silence of the Spirit several centuries earlier as van der Toorn suggests, but it is one that the religious establishment in Jesus' time and thereafter would have found persuasive. Cessationist doctrine tends to favor the learned establishment, the scribes and theologians, over unlettered prophets and charismatics. The members of the religious establishment saw themselves as the defenders of Orthodoxy. Since Jesus and John did not belong to their group, and did not adhere to their interpretation of Scripture, they could not have been led by God in their view. The scribes opposed Jesus in part because he threatened their position in Jewish society; he spoke with authority but had not been schooled in their way of thought (Mt. 7.29, Mt. 13.54-57; Mk. 6.2). It is possible that the Tannaite rabbis later used this same doctrine to explain why Jesus could not have been a true prophet.⁵⁴ If this theory is correct, and if Talmudic teaching in turn lies at the basis of Christian cessationist claims as Ruthven suggests, we

⁵⁴ 'It has been suggested, not improbably, that the rabbinic texts denying the existence of prophecy during the late Second Temple period might reflect an apologetic attempt to undermine the prophetic claims of the early Christians' (Aune, 104).

have the odd situation of Christian theologians basing their doctrine of Scripture on anti-Christian polemics.⁵⁵

What function does Cessationism have?

Given the weak scriptural support for the doctrine of cessationism and the lack of evidence for the Spirit growing silent in the historical records of the early Church, it may seem surprising that cessationism was a part of Protestant Orthodoxy for so long. There may of course be any number of reasons why people find one doctrine more compelling than another, and it is likely that they are not always aware of all the reasons for their preferences. I suggest, however, that the doctrine of the silence of the Spirit was particularly well-established in certain theological circles because of the function it played there. Cessationism had the same function for these Christian theologians as it did for the scribes and rabbis before them: it secured the position of the scholars in the religious community and rendered them immune to criticism by charismatic prophets and by the larger established Church. I do not wish to imply that this doctrine was originally put forward by Reformed theologians to justify their own position in the new church hierarchy. But I do think that it remained influential for as long as it did because it contributed to securing not only the theological independence of the Reformed churches but also the prominent position of their learned teachers.

⁵⁵ Ruthven, 14. I do not wish to suggest that all Protestants have a view of Scripture that is based on rabbinical thought. In addition to assuming the authoritative status traditionally given to Scripture by the Church, Luther and other early reformers were influenced by the humanist call to return to the original sources in emphasizing Scripture over tradition. The difficulty was how to justify the Protestant Scripture principle theologically; on what basis could the interpretations of later theologians and councils be ignored? Certain Reformed theologians that sought to justify their view of the canon found in the rabbinic doctrine of the silence of the Spirit just the defence they needed.

The doctrine of the silence of the Spirit defends the unique authority of Scripture and explains the grounds on which Protestants maintain that Scripture alone may serve as the basis of the faith. For those Protestants who approach Scripture as one might a body of laws, as an essentially timeless document without internal contradictions, this doctrine may have been especially necessary.⁵⁶ When Reformed churches rejected Roman Catholic canon law, its place was taken by Scripture.⁵⁷

It is perhaps not coincidental that cessationism has an especially strong heritage in the Reformed tradition where, ever since Calvin first published his *Institutes* in 1536, systematic theology has been a central concern. As McGowan points out, in the Reformed tradition beginning with the Genevan Confession of 1536, creeds and systematic theologies typically begin with a section on the doctrine of Scripture. Once it has been established that Scripture is the only completely reliable source for the knowledge of God and his will, the theological system can be developed on its basis.⁵⁸ Thus, Charles Hodge considered it the task of systematic theology to show the ‘harmony and consistency’ of the facts of Scripture.⁵⁹ Scripture is a ‘store-house of facts’,⁶⁰ and ‘the duty of the Christian theologian is to ascertain, collect, and combine all the facts which God has revealed concerning himself and our relationship to Him.’⁶¹ As Reformed theologians increasingly distanced themselves from the Roman Catholic tradition, they sought to anchor the authority of Scripture in something other

than its use in the Church.⁶² Cessationism offered such a basis.

Cessationist doctrine is coupled with the belief in the verbal inspiration of Scripture and the doctrine of inerrancy. Pre-modern theologians – as indeed many later theologians as well – commonly held that every word of Scripture was dictated by God.⁶³ For example, A.A. Hodge wrote,

the divine influence [...] which accompanied the sacred writers in what they wrote, extends to their expression of their thoughts in language, as well as to the thoughts themselves. The effect being that in the original autograph copies the language expresses the thought God intended to convey with infallible accuracy, so that the words as well as the thoughts are God’s revelation to us.⁶⁴

This view lives on among inerrantists today. Grudem writes that the Old Testament prophets ‘claimed repeatedly that *their very words* were words that God had given them to deliver’.⁶⁵ While the same holds true for the apostles who authored the New Testament in his view, later works were not inspired in the same way. The doctrine of the silence of the Spirit thus supported the claim that the Scriptures are an objective source for divine truth. Scripture is held to be uniquely reliable, because its contents were said to be the result of divine dictation. Should anyone counter that he can find no parallel to this in later Church history, one could readily reply that this is because the Spirit no longer works the way he did. Cessationists insist that the apostles were uniquely inspired. For example, Grudem

⁵⁶ It is worth asking to what extent Protestant views of Scripture has been colored by their having access to these texts as a single volume, instead of as in Orthodox liturgy, in several different volumes.

⁵⁷ Reventlow writes that among the Puritans, ‘the Bible has to take the place of the canon law which hitherto has governed the outward form of the church’. Graf Henning Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 110.

⁵⁸ A.T.B. McGowan. *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage*. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2007), 12, 26.

⁵⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology in three volumes*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2.

⁶⁰ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 10.

⁶¹ Hodge, *Systematic theology*, 11.

⁶² Goldingay, 258. Luther was not a cessationist, and Calvin referred more often to the Church Fathers than later Reformed theologians did (D.H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: a Primer for Suspicious Protestants*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 184, 215).

⁶³ Goldingay (227) notes that Augustine, Jerome and John Chrysostom seem to have been the first to put forward this view.

⁶⁴ A.A. Hodge *Outlines of Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1949 (1878)) pp. 66-67

⁶⁵ Grudem, 22. The Hebrew word for ‘word’ does not have as unambiguous a meaning as Grudem implies; see James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford University Press, 1961) pp. 129-140.

believes that the apostles were uniquely ‘given the ability from the Holy Spirit to recall accurately the words and deeds of Jesus and to interpret them rightly for subsequent generations’.⁶⁶ This conviction is not entirely scriptural. As Ruthven points out, Paul did not consider the other apostles infallible (cf. Gal. 2:11). Nor were apostles foremost writers of Scripture, but eyewitnesses to Christ’s resurrection (Acts 1:22), preachers of the Gospel (cf. *1 Clem.* 42), specially commissioned by Christ (Mt. 10:2, Acts 1:2) as ‘pioneer missionaries’.⁶⁷ Even theologians who don’t hold to the divine dictation model of revelation insist that Scripture is uniquely inspired, and thereby may be said to affirm a form of modified cessationism. Pentecostal scholar Higgins discusses what criteria were used to determine which writings were canonical. He mentions criteria such as apostolicity and authenticity, but maintains, ‘Of primary concern was whether the writing was regarded as inspired. Only those writings breathed out by God fit the measure of the authoritative Word of God’.⁶⁸ This claim is not historically accurate, but it reflects the views of many Protestants who support their view of the uniqueness of the Bible by referring to 2 Tim. 3:16.⁶⁹ They assume that the Spirit must have in some sense been more active back then than he is now.

Cessationism has also been used to support the historical accuracy of problematic passages in Scripture – before the New Testament was canonized, miracles happened, today they don’t. When it comes to non-Biblical reports of miracles, Warfield shares the skepticism of his atheist contemporaries.⁷⁰ Warfield seems to have opposed Roman Catholic ecclesiastical records of

miracles as a matter of principle. If these reports are accepted, there is no reason not to accept later miracles, even down to the present day: ‘the genuineness of the ecclesiastical miracles being once allowed, no stopping place can be found until the whole series of alleged miracles down to our own day be admitted’.⁷¹ Warfield cannot grant that miracles happen today, hence it is necessary for him to assert that they didn’t happen earlier either. Warfield makes an exception for the apostolic age. Warfield does not subject the accounts of miracles in the New Testament to any criticism; his presuppositions rule out such a critical stance. Miracles attested by other sources than the New Testament are rejected as they are supported by unreliable witnesses. Those referred to in the New Testament are accepted, because the New Testament is the most reliable witness of all. His reasoning is circular; he claims that miracles were given in support of revelation, but in fact it is only those miracles that are referred to in texts he accepts as being divinely revealed that he gives credence to. In reality, for Warfield revelation proves the authenticity of (certain) miracles, not the other way around.⁷² In practice Warfield makes the ‘apostolic era’ a mythical period, essentially discontinuous with the rest of history. In so doing, he ironically partakes in a long Christian tradition of idealizing the golden age of the Church.⁷³ As D.H. Williams points out, this view of the apostolic period was encouraged by the development of New Testament studies as an academic discipline separate from Patristics and Church History with ‘different methods and biases’, and with higher status than these other disciplines, which Protestants have often considered to be of secondary importance.⁷⁴

In addition to supplying a firm foundation for systematic theologies, the doctrine of the silence of the Spirit has made it possible for the theological establishment to silence prophetic voices. The doctrine had this function both in pre-Christian times and in the Church. It provides a

⁶⁶ Grudem, 29.

⁶⁷ Ruthven, 196-197, 200. See also Grudem, 230.

⁶⁸ John R. Higgins, “God’s Inspired Word”. In Stanley M. Horton, ed., *Systematic Theology. Revised edition.* (Springfield, Missouri: Logion, 2007), 108.

⁶⁹ While *theopneustos* is only used in the New Testament in this verse, Craig D. Allert (*A High View of Scripture: the Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) pp. 64, 155) notes that Gregory of Nyssa used the adjective *theopneustos*, God-breathed, to describe a non-biblical text.

⁷⁰ Ruthven, 173.

⁷¹ Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*, 29.

⁷² See also Ruthven, 173.

⁷³ Cf. James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.

⁷⁴ D.H. Williams, 84.

defense against self-proclaimed prophets and their potentially heretical teachings and practices.⁷⁵ By restricting ultimate authority to a few documents written in a language that the masses were unable to read, the number of people who can threaten the scribes' interpretations was strongly limited. It is a form of theological protectionism.⁷⁶

Sophisticated cessationists do not deny outright the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit, but his public revelatory activity is limited to guiding the interpretation of Scripture, not to giving any new teaching. The Westminster divines made a distinction between mediate and immediate revelation. They held that God did still speak to people through dreams mediated through Scripture. In practice mediate revelation did not really look any different from immediate revelation. For example, the divines believed that it was through the ministry of an angel that the Gunpowder plot of 1605 was revealed; the scriptural basis they found for that revelation was rather vague; the dream reflected God's promise in Scripture to deliver his people.⁷⁷ Milne implies (but doesn't state outright) that the distinction between mediate and immediate revelation was theologically necessitated:

It would have been highly controversial for the Westminster Assembly to allow for 'immediate' revelation which had no reference to Scripture, or to condone a power to perform modern miracles, because always close to the consciousness of the Protestant divine were the assertions of both the Catholic and radical Reformation opposition who laid claim to continuing extra-biblical revelations and miracles. Had the divines undermined the long-established polemic against Rome and the sects that modern miracles were either delusions or of satanic origin, they would have been over-

⁷⁵ Cf. Goldingay, 243.

⁷⁶ Compare Boyer's analysis of the rise of the religious guild, especially p. 318: 'Literate guilds promote texts as the source of guaranteed truths. They tend to downplay intuition, divination, personal inspiration, orally transmitted lore and 'essential' persons because all these naturally fall outside the guild's control'. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The human instincts that fashion gods, spirits, and ancestors*. (London: Vintage, 2001).

⁷⁷ Milne, 288.

turning a key plank of Protestant orthodoxy that dated from the earliest days of the Reformation.⁷⁸

Learned preachers and theologians are the cessationist ideal. As Craig puts it, 'one's views of preaching and prophecy are inversely proportional: a high view of preaching, a dim view of prophecy and vice versa'.⁷⁹ As was shown, Protestant cessationism developed primarily among Reformed churches; here preachers used academic garb to enhance their authority, suggesting that they based their status on learning.⁸⁰ Some who most ardently hold to the cessationist doctrine are also most insistent on referring to themselves and their spiritual soul mates with full academic titles; their status depends on years of study in the right institutions, not on the spontaneous filling with the Holy Spirit as among the Charismatics or on the *character indelebilis* conferred at ordination through the laying on of hands in apostolic succession as in the Roman Catholic Church.⁸¹ It is difficult not to see striking similarities to the stance of the scribes and Levites in Jesus' time. They too had received their credentials after going through years of study at the feet of a respected rabbi, and they opposed Jesus in part because his unsanctioned preaching threatened their monopoly. There are similar developments in other religious traditions. For example, in some Islamic legal traditions it is said that the gates of *ijtihad* (interpretation) have been closed, meaning that legal scholars must adhere to earlier interpretations of the law and may not put forward new ones.⁸²

⁷⁸ Milne, 288-289.

⁷⁹ Philip A. Craig, "'And Prophecy Shall Cease': Jonathan Edwards on the Cessation of the Gift of Prophecy,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (2002), 180.

⁸⁰ Graeme Murdock ('Dressed to Repress?: Protestant Clerical Dress and the Regulation of Morality in Early Modern Europe.' *Fashion Theory* 4, 2000, 181) writes regarding Reformed ministers in Geneva, 'The clergy ... wore loose-fitting, full-sleeved black gowns, which reflected Calvin's views that they ought to appear as a professionally-trained, disciplined preaching elite'.

⁸¹ The most extreme example of this tendency that I have found is a dissertation defending cessationism written by a scholar in 2002, who after his name lists 20 titles, including several doctorates.

⁸² Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 157; John L. Es-

This does not mean that all those who advocated the cessationist doctrine did so out of expediency; more likely, most already believed they knew the right answer, all they needed was to find the proper scriptural passages to support their convictions.⁸³ Their reasoning was based on their own experiences, or lack thereof. Because they had not experienced prophetic gifts, no one had.⁸⁴ They could not imagine that God could show his will more clearly to an illiterate outsider than to the learned representatives of the religious establishment. In the process, Simpson argues, they reduced Christ's presence to the presence of the written word.⁸⁵ Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would remain with his people for ever (Jn. 14:16) and would continue to guide them in all truth, but cessationists taught – like the scribes before them -- that now it was through learned interpreters of Scripture that the Holy Spirit worked. While they did not claim that the Spirit had ceased guiding the Church, they rejected the notion of new revelation, and thus arbitrarily limited the activity of the Spirit in the Church.

Cessationist doctrine is a two edged sword. It has not only been used to defend the position of the religious establishment, but has also been turned against the religious establishment. The doctrine allowed Radical reformers and other

restorationists to reject the interpretations of the larger church and to render themselves immune from criticism by the leadership of that church. Restorationists used the doctrine of cessationism to protect their own revelations from criticism. They could argue that the leaders of the larger church could not recognize that their words and visions were divinely inspired because the church had apostatized and its leaders consequently did not have the Holy Spirit and the gift of the discernment.

In practice the doctrine of the silence of the Spirit tends to make a virtue out of ignorance. Cessationists and restorationists alike feel they may ignore all texts but the Bible because only the Bible is inspired, and through it the Spirit speaks directly to the individual reader. It should not come as any surprise if cessationists and restorationists do not hear the Spirit speaking to the Church in the period between the first century and their own time; they weren't there to hear him, and they refused to trust the witness of those who were.⁸⁶ But their stance is dangerous; when we ignore all texts but the Bible we close ourselves to the voice of the Spirit that guided the community that formulated the canon, and risk misinterpreting Scripture, in the same way as those who authored heresies in the past.⁸⁷

posito, *Islam: The Straight Path. Revised third edition.* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 117.

⁸³ Cf. Ruthven, 170, regarding Warfield's approach. But see McGowan's critique of inerrantists: A 'problem with the fundamentalist inerrantist is a tendency to choose a position because it is convenient, rather than because it is demonstrably true' (McGowan, 104).

⁸⁴ Cf. Goldingay, 243.

⁸⁵ Cf. Simpson, 248

⁸⁶ Allert, 76: 'The appeal to the Bible alone in evangelicalism is the result, in part, of a deep-seated suspicion and even rejection of the church in the patristic age as somehow corrupt'.

⁸⁷ Cf. Allert, 175.