

The Uneasy Conscience of a Non-Charismatic Evangelical

By:

[Daniel B. Wallace, Th.M., Ph.D.](#)

Ed. Note: This message is a slightly modified version of what was given at the Evangelical Theological Society's regional meeting in 1994, held at John Brown University in Arkansas. It may be helpful for those reading Dr. Wallace's other essays on conflicting pneumatologies (i.e., different views of the Holy Spirit's ministry) to gain a balanced perspective.

Introduction

As is the case with past presidents of ETS-SW, I have had quite some time to think about this address. In my case, the topic I had in mind two years ago has been shelved. In the past eighteen months, I believe that the Lord has laid on my heart a new topic. In a few moments, you will learn what the catalyst was that brought about this change. As for the rest of the message, you will have to be the judge as to whether the impetus was from the Lord or a different source.

Three preliminary remarks are in order. First, I need to define my target audience. Some of you here are charismatics or Pentecostals. I will not be speaking to you tonight. But I think that you will agree with much that I have to say. I invite you to listen in as I address my non-charismatic brothers and sisters.

Second, I speak from a non-charismatic or cessationist position. That is to say, I believe that certain gifts of the Holy Spirit were employed in the earliest stage of Christianity to *authenticate* that God was doing something new. These "sign gifts" – such as the gifts of healing, tongues, miracles – *ceased* with the death of the last apostle. This is what I mean by "cessationism." Some of you fellow cessationists might style yourselves as "soft" cessationists whereby you mean that *some* of the sign gifts continue, or that the sign gifts may crop up in locations where the gospel is introduced afresh,¹ or that you are presently agnostic about these gifts, but are not a practicing charismatic. For purposes of argument, I will take a hard line. In this way, anything I affirm about the Holy Spirit's ministry today should not be perceived as being generated from a closet charismatic. Further, it is not my purpose to defend cessationism. That, I understand, will be taken up in the panel discussion tomorrow. Rather, I wish to address some concerns that I, as a cessationist, have concerning the role of the Holy Spirit today among cessationists.

Third, based on my past performance at ETS meetings, you probably expect a heavily documented, fairly well researched, somewhat abstract, academic lecture. This is not of that ilk. There is a place for such lectures, but not here, not now, not with this topic. Rather, this message will be personal and anecdotal. I trust that, in spite of the paucity of footnotes, you will not dismiss this message as untrue. It is a message borne of my experience with God. This, of course, disqualifies it from publication in any theological journal! But I hope and pray that it does not disqualify it from stimulating you intellectually – not, as I said, because I have investigated every nook and cranny of pneumatology. But because it rings true. Hopefully – and this is my real desire and prayer – your hearts will be convicted as much as your heads stimulated.

This address has two parts. First is a topic rarely mentioned at ETS: a personal testimony. Perhaps in our scholarly endeavor to avoid *ad hominem* arguments, we have come to disdain anything of a personal nature. But our minds cannot be separated from our hearts. What drives us to study a given topic often receives its impulse from highly personal struggles. And at the risk of making myself vulnerable to you, of opening myself up to charges such as, "Wallace's views can be dismissed because we know whence they come," I wish to share with you, at some length, who I am and how God is working in my life. Second, I have **eleven** theses to put on the table – theses that have to do with our deficiencies in how we relate to the Holy Spirit. These theses are *only* at a seminal stage² – indeed, I would like to *nail down* 95 of them in due time!

My Spiritual Journey

I grew up in a conservative Baptist church in southern California. I was converted at age four when I attended Vacation Bible School in the summer of 1956. My brother, at the ripe old age of five and a half, led me to Christ. Ironically, he was not a believer at the time. A dozen years later I was instrumental in bringing him to the Savior.

I grew up in the church. My youth was characterized by timidity: I was a Clark Kent with *no* alter ego. I was afraid of life, afraid to explore, afraid to question *out loud*. In spite of this – or, perhaps because of this, I was a leader in the youth group. But I had questions that would not go away – questions about an authentic Christian experience. At age sixteen I was in the midst of a life-threatening crisis: should I or should I not ask Terri C. out for a date? Because of the turmoil in my soul, I quickly agreed when a friend invited me to a charismatic revival at Melodyland in Anaheim, California. The house was packed; several thousand were in attendance. The speaker said some things that disturbed me intellectually. When he gave an altar call, I was ready to go forward and give him a piece of my mind. As I got up out of my seat, the Holy Spirit grabbed my heart and said, "No, this is not the reason you're going forward. You need to get right with God." Now, he did not speak audibly to me. These words are not to be put in red letters. But as I rose, before I took one step, I was overwhelmingly convicted of my own sin. The Spirit of God was definitely in that place.

As I came forward, about four or five hundred other people streamed forth to the center stage. With hundreds of people there, I was quite amazed when the speaker, microphone in hand, selected me. "Why have you come forward, young man?" he queried. "I came to rededicate my life to Christ," I answered. It was a good thing that the Holy Spirit changed my heart before my lips got in gear!

That night, January 6, 1969, was the major turning point in my life. I still celebrate it as my spiritual birthday (since the exact date of my conversion at age four was and still is a bit fuzzy).

That same night, before I left Melodyland, a man named David Berg invited me to visit his fellowship in Huntington Beach. His group, known then as the Huntington Beach Light House, later became known as *The Children of God*; David Berg was later called David Moses or Moses David.

I joined the group and became a charismatic. The group was vibrant in its worship, and courageous in its evangelism. My faith was alive. My prayer life was thriving. And I gained courage.

I would pray for hours daily, praying that God would grant me the gift of tongues. When one of the "apostles" (apostle Bob, I believe³) at the Light House discovered that I had not spoken in tongues, he asked if I had been baptized in the Spirit. When I answered in the negative, he laid his hands on me and did the job right there. Observing that nothing had changed, he doubted my salvation.

So I quietly left the group. In the coming months, I fellowshiped at Calvary Chapel, where the neo-charismatic movement finds its origins. Finally, and quite naturally, I left the charismatic movement altogether. But my zeal for God was not quenched. I was a part of the Jesus movement as a non-charismatic. I continued to pray, evangelize, and read my Bible. In fact, there was a long stretch of time in which I read my New Testament, cover to cover, *every* week. I saw God's hand in everything. And the Lord granted me a measure of courage which was not and is not *naturally* mine.⁴ Although I had left the charismatic movement, it took me a long time before I replaced my passion for Jesus Christ with a passion for the Bible.

Because of my interest in spiritual things, I decided to attend a Christian liberal arts college. I attended Biola University, married a beautiful Irish lass⁵ right out of college, and came to Dallas for more theological training.

Through the years, after going to a Christian college and a cessationist seminary, I began to slip away from my early, vibrant contact with God. My understanding of scripture was heightened, but my walk with God slowed down to a crawl. I took a defensive and apologetic posture in my studies of scripture. In the last several years, I've been questioning the adequacy of such a stance – recognizing, subconsciously at least, that it did not satisfy my deepest longings.

Joe Aldrich, the president of Multnomah Bible College once told me, "It takes the average seminary graduate five years to thaw out from the experience." For most seminary graduates, I suspect, that thawing out may come through the natural course of events. But it took several crises before the Lord started warming me up again. The latest one was what happened to my son, Andy, just two years ago – when he was eight years old.

In December 1991, Andy was kicked in the stomach by a school bully. He developed stomach pains which persisted for quite some time. Two months later, through a providentially guided indiscretion, Andy left the bathroom door open when my wife walked by. She saw something that horrified her: his urine was brown. That same day, she took him to our family physician. This began a series of doctors and specialists. None of them had a clue as to what was wrong. Finally, he was admitted to Children's Hospital on April 20, 1992, scheduled for a kidney biopsy.

Before the biopsy was to be performed, a sonogram was conducted. We had anticipated a blood clot on the kidney, but the sonogram revealed that something more was present. Perhaps it was a tumor. *One* physician suggested exploratory surgery instead of a biopsy. This sounded crazy to me! Cut my "Beaker"⁶ open! We agreed, grudgingly, to this procedure.

The surgery took place on Wednesday, April 22. That's when the nightmare began. One of the physicians prepped us ahead of time:

Mr. and Mrs. Wallace, I wouldn't be overly worried about this operation. What the sonogram revealed may still be just a blood clot. And if it's not a blood clot, then, most likely, it's a benign tumor. And if it's not benign, then it is probably a Wilm's tumor. This is a congenital kidney cancer found in children. It's treatable and curable. However, if it's not a Wilm's tumor, there is the very *slight* possibility that what your son has is *renal cell carcinoma*. But that is such a rare cancer in children that the likelihood is quite remote.

As the hours during and after the surgery wore on, we found ourselves getting hit with wave after wave of dreaded news. Andy, indeed, had renal cell carcinoma (RCC). And it was not just the normal type – which was lethal enough. Andy had the more potent strain of RCC. Less than *ten* children ever diagnosed worldwide have lived beyond two years with this strain of RCC. Apart from radical surgery, it's virtually untreatable and incurable, as far as medical science knows.

There was good news through all this, news of a providential character, news which gave me and still gives me hope that my son will live. First, the bully who kicked Andy in the stomach probably saved his life. Only in one third of the cases of RCC is there bloody urine. The other symptoms are usually a *mild* stomach ache and an occasional low-grade fever.⁷ That kick to the stomach probably triggered the bloody urine. Second, the one physician who insisted on exploratory surgery instead of a biopsy also saved his life. RCC is so potent a cancer that every case on record in which a biopsy was performed resulted in the death of the patient. In the midst of wondering, of confusion, of crying out to God, I could still see his hand in all this.

Andy's kidney was removed and he went through various grueling tests in which his body was probed for any remnants of cancer. For those of you familiar with cancer, I don't need to tell you about the torture of bone marrow scans. Six days of testing produced no trace of cancer.

RCC in children is so rare that Andy's case was the first one reported in the United States in eight years. Globally, he is the 161st child ever diagnosed with it. There are no support groups! Before Andy left the hospital a team of ten physicians could not decide whether to administer chemotherapy. It would strictly be a preventive measure, but with RCC, prevention is everything. If the cancer metastasizes again, he will die (as far as statistics reveal). No child has yet survived a return of RCC. The choice was ours whether or not to go with chemotherapy.

We decided to go with chemotherapy, because the risk of not doing it, wondering whether that might kill him, was too great to bear. I cannot adequately describe what the next six months were like – for Andy, for me and his mother, for his three brothers. But I can tell you that I was in an emotional wasteland. I was angry with God and I found him to be quite distant. Here was this precious little boy who was losing his hair, and losing weight. At one point he weighed only *forty-five* pounds. His twin brother at that time weighed eighty-five pounds. Andy was so weak that we had to carry him everywhere.

Through this experience I found that the Bible was not adequate. I needed God in a personal way – not as an object of my study, but as friend, guide, comforter. I needed an existential experience of the Holy One. Quite frankly, I found that the Bible was not the answer. I found the scriptures to be helpful – even authoritatively helpful – as a guide. But without *feeling God*, the Bible gave little solace. In the midst of this "summer from hell," I began to examine what had become of my faith. I found a longing to get closer to God, but found myself unable to do so through *my* normal means: exegesis, scripture reading, more exegesis. I believe that I had depersonalized God so much that when I really needed him I didn't know how to relate. I longed for him, but found many community-wide restrictions in my cessationist environment. I found a suffocation of the Spirit in my evangelical tradition as well as in my own heart.

It was this experience of my son's cancer that brought me back to my senses, that brought me back to my roots. And out of this experience I have been wrestling in the last eighteen months with practical issues of pneumatology.

Eleven Theses

I believe that in North America today, there are two brands of conservative Christianity, neither of which is wholly satisfactory. There is charismatic Christianity – the free spirited, right brain, experiential roller coaster. And then there is the evangelical rationalism – uptight, left brain, logical, talking head, argumentative. Neither of these is adequate. Don't get me wrong: I'm a fully committed cessationist. I believe that the sign gifts ceased in the first century. But I think that cessationists need to begin doing serious business with God. We need a deep-rooted repentance – both individually and communally.

I want to offer you eleven suggestions, eleven challenges – eleven theses if you will – that we need to address. I don't yet have 95 of them – and this isn't the Wittenberg Church. And, as I said at the beginning, this list is in a seminal stage. These theses are in a somewhat random order.

(1) *Although the sign gifts died in the first century, the Holy Spirit did not.* We all can affirm that theologically, but pragmatically we act as though he died too. This is my fundamental thesis, and it's well worth exploring. What can we, as cessationists, affirm that the Holy Spirit is doing today? What did Jesus mean when he said, "My sheep hear my voice?" What did Paul mean when he declared, "Those who are led by the Spirit are the sons of God"? What did John mean when he wrote, "You have an anointing from the Holy One"?

(2) *Although charismatics have given a higher priority to experience than to relationship, rationalistic evangelicals have given a higher priority to knowledge than to relationship.* Both of these miss the mark. And Paul, in 1 Corinthians, condemns both. Knowledge puffs up; and spiritual experience without love is worthless.

(3) *This emphasis on knowledge over relationship has produced in us a bibliolatry.* Since the text is our task, we have made it our God. It has become our idol. Let me state this bluntly: *The Bible is not a member of the Trinity.* One lady in my church facetiously told me, "I believe in the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Bible."

One of the great legacies Karl Barth left behind was his strong Christocentric focus. It is a shame that too many of us have reacted so strongly to Barth, for in our zeal to show his bibliological deficiencies we have become biblioters in the process. Barth and Calvin share a lot in common: there is a warmth, a piety, a devotion, an awe in the presence of God that is lacking in too many theological tomes generated from our circles.

(4) *The net effect of such bibliolatry is a depersonalization of God.* Eventually, we no longer relate to him. He becomes the object of our investigation rather than the Lord to whom we are subject. The vitality of our religion gets sucked out. As God gets dissected and trisected (in the case of you trichotomists), our stance changes from "I trust in" to "I believe that."

(5) *Part of the motivation for this depersonalization of God is our increasing craving for control.* What we despise most about charismatics is their loss of control, their emotionalism. We fear that. We take comfort in the fact that part of the fruit of the Spirit is "self-control." But by this we mean "do all things in moderation" – including worshipping God. But should we not have a reckless abandon in our devotion to him? Should we not throw ourselves on him, knowing that apart from him we can do nothing?

Instead, as typical cessationists, we want to be in control at all times. Even when it means that we shut God out. It is this issue of control that kept my friend Sam a cessationist so long. Now, as a member of the Vineyard movement, Sam is quite happy: he acknowledges that he never was in control in the first place. In the midst of what I consider to be a heterodox shift on his part, there is this honest breakthrough with God.

(6) *God is still a God of healing and miracles.* As a cessationist, I can affirm the fact of miracles without affirming the miracle-worker. God is still a God of healing even though his normal modus operandi is not through a faith-healer. If I can be permitted an overgeneralization, the problem with charismatics is that they believe that God not only can heal, but that he must heal. God thus becomes an instrument, wielded by the almighty Christian. That is one reason why, historically, charismata has been a movement among Arminians. At the same time, the problem with non-charismatics is that although they claim that God can heal, they act as if he won't. I don't really think they believe in God's ability – they don't really believe that God can heal. Thus, the problem with charismatics is a denial of God's sovereignty; the problem with non-charismatics is a denial of God's ability or goodness or both. And neither group is being completely honest with God. Neither is submissively trusting him.

Let me take this a step further. Is it possible for a Calvinist to say that an Arminian can be used of the Lord to bring someone salvation? Yes, I think Calvinists would agree that such a thing is possible. If so, is this not analogous to God using a "faith-healer" to heal someone? In other words, can I, as a cessationist, affirm that sometimes God heals someone through the presence or stimulus of a faith-healer? Perhaps the sick individual, or the faith-healer, was exercising great faith. (After all, charismatics tend to believe in God's ability more than cessationists.) In such instances, could we not say that rather than empowering the faith-healer, God was simply honoring the faith?

If this scenario is correct, then we would not expect every person touched by a faith-healer to be healed. And that is exactly what we find: not everyone is healed. At the same time, because the normal modus operandi of healing is through someone's faith, as a cessationist I can affirm both that there is often great faith in charismatic circles and that there is no such thing as a bona fide faith-healer today. I can affirm miracles in their midst without affirming the miracle-worker.

(7) *Evangelical rationalism can lead to spiritual defection.* I am referring to the suffocation of the Spirit in post-graduate theological training, as well as the seduction of academia. Most of us can think of examples of gifted young students we have mentored who seemed to lose all of their Christian conviction in an academic setting. For many of us, this recollection is too painful. How many times have we sent Daniels into the lions' den, only to tell them by our actions that prayer won't do any good?

One particular instance is very difficult for me to think about. One of my brightest master's students about thirteen years ago went on for doctoral work overseas. We prepared him well in exegesis. But we did not prepare him well in prayer. A couple of years ago I caught up with him and discovered that he was only confused about his evangelical heritage. He was even questioning the uniqueness of Jesus. This student had suppressed part of the arsenal at his disposal: the witness of the Spirit, something non-believers can't touch. To this day I wonder how much I contributed to this man's confusion and suppression of the Spirit's witness.

It is not the historical evidences *alone* that can lead one to embrace the resurrection as true. The Spirit must work on our hearts, overcoming our natural reticence. When our graduates go on for doctoral work, and forget that the Spirit brought them to Christ in the first place, and suppress his witness in their hearts, they are ripe for spiritual defection. They need to be reminded – as do all of us who live in an academic setting – that exegesis and apologetics are not the sum of the Christian life.

I speak not only from the experience of my students. In my own doctoral program, while seriously grappling with the evidence for the resurrection, I suddenly found myself in an existential crisis. I was reading in biblical theology at the time, wrestling with those two great minds, Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth. I was impressed with the fact that as strong as the historical evidence is for the resurrection, there is and always will be a measure of doubt. Evidence alone cannot bridge the gap between us and God. As much as I wanted the evidence to go all the way, in integrity of heart and mind, I couldn't make it do so. At one point there was real despair in my heart. I had gotten so sucked in to the cult of objectivism that I forgot who it was who brought me to faith in the first place. Only when I grudgingly accepted the fact that *some* faith had to be involved – and that through the Spirit's agency – could I get past my despair. The non-verifiable elements of evangelicalism had become an embarrassment to me, rather than an anchor.

(8) *The power brokers of rational evangelicalism, since the turn of the century, have been white, obsessive-compulsive males.* Ever since the days of the Princetonians (Warfield, Hodge, Machen, et al.), American non-charismatic evangelicalism has been dominated by Scottish common sense, post-Enlightenment, left-brain, obsessive-compulsive, white males. Perhaps this situation is suppressing a part of the image of God; perhaps it is suppressing a part of the witness

of the Spirit. And perhaps it is not in line with historic Christianity.⁸ The implications of this such demographics are manifold. Three of them are as follows.

- The white evangelical community needs to listen to and *learn* from the black evangelical community. I find it most fascinating that the experience of God in the black *non*-charismatic community is quite different from that in the white non-charismatic community. In many ways, it resembles the white charismatic experience more than the white cessationist experience of God. A full-orbed experience of God must take place in the context of community. And that community must be heterogenous. If, as has been often stated, the 11 o'clock hour on Sunday morning is the most segregated in America, then something is desperately wrong with the Church.
- The Holy Spirit does not work just on the left brain. He also works on the right brain: he sparks our imagination, causes us to rejoice, laugh, sing, and *create*. Few Christians are engaged and fully committed to the arts today. Where are the hymn writers? Where are the novelists? Painters? Playwrights? A very high-powered editor of a Christian magazine told me two weeks ago that he knows of only one exceptional Christian fiction writer. What are our seminaries doing to encourage these right brainers? What is the Church doing to encourage them?
- By and large, women are more in tune with their right brain than men are. We men have failed to listen to the women in our midst – and this failure is related to our not hearing the voice of the Spirit. If the *Imago Dei* is both male and female, by squelching the valuable contribution of women, we distort that very image before a watching world.

(9) The Holy Spirit's guidance is still needed in discerning the will of God. The rationalism in our circles makes decision-making a purely cognitive exercise. There is no place for prayer. There is no room for the Spirit. I believe there is a middle ground between expecting daily revelations on the one hand, and basing decisions solely on logic and common sense on the other. Garry Friesen's *Decision-Making and the Will of God* went a long way to correct some silly notions about how we function in the mundane. But I believe that Friesen went too far. I may not receive revelations, but I do believe that the Spirit often guides me with inarticulate impulses. Admittedly, this is primarily in the moral realm and Friesen was dealing basically with the amoral realm. Yet, a basic recognition that the Spirit does guide me today in all realms makes me increasingly sensitive to his guidance in the moral realm.

(10) In the midst of seeking out the power of the Spirit, we must not avoid the sufferings of Christ. This is the message of Mark: the disciples could not have Christ in his glory without Christ in his suffering. Too often when we decide that it's a good thing to get to know God again, we go about it on our own terms. Again, I speak from personal experience.

Six weeks ago, one of my students died of cancer. Another was about to die. I began urging students at Dallas Seminary to pray for God's intervention. The Lord did not answer our prayer in the way we had hoped. Three weeks ago, Brendan Ryan was buried. My own pain was increased when I saw his three small children paraded in front of the mourners at his memorial

service. I had only visited Brendan once in the hospital; I was determined not to let such happen again.

Two more of my students are on the verge of death. I have called them and visited them in the past week. And I learned about suffering and honesty with God. I questioned God – and still do. Out of my pain – pain for these students and their families, pain for my son, pain for myself – comes honesty and growth. I have moments when I doubt God's goodness. Yet I do not doubt that he has suffered for me far more than I will ever suffer for him. And that is the only reason I let him hold my hand through this dark valley. In seeking God's power, I discovered his person. He is not just omnipotent; he is also the God of all comfort. And taking us *through* suffering, not out of it, is one of the primary means that the Spirit uses today in bringing us to God.

(11) Finally, a question: To what does the Spirit bear witness? Certainly the resurrection of Christ. How about the scriptures? A particular interpretation perhaps? Eschatological issues? Exegetical issues? Don't be too quick to answer. Some of this needs rethinking . . . In fact, my challenge to each of you is this: reexamine the New Testament teaching about the Holy Spirit. Don't gloss over the passages, but wrestle with what they mean. If the Spirit did not die in the first century, then what is he doing today?

1 This is what I would call concentric cessationism, as opposed to linear cessationism. That is, rather than taking a chronologically linear approach, this kind of cessationism affirms that as the gospel moves, like the rippling effect of a stone dropping into a pond, in a space-time expanding circle away from first century Jerusalem, the sign gifts will still exist on the cutting edge of that circle. Thus, for example, in third world countries at the time when the gospel is first proclaimed, the sign gifts would be present. This view, then, would allow for these gifts to exist on the frontiers of Christianity, but would be more skeptical of them in the 'worked over' areas.

2 At present I am co-editing a book on this very topic, provisionally entitled, *Who's Afraid of the Holy Spirit? Or, Pneumatic Christianity: A Third Alternative*. This book will be written by cessationists for cessationists. We have a very long lead time with the publisher, in part to get the qualified people to sign on, in part to give the two editors time to sort out and articulate what God is doing in the midst of their present crises.

As well, this entire paper is in a seminal stage of development. I trust you will forgive me for not providing you with a fully manuscripted text.

3 There were twelve apostles at the Light House. We knew each one only by their first name because, as apostle Bob said, "the original apostles only had one name."

4 So much so that as a high school student, during late 60's, I visited the University of California at Irvine to evangelize in a public forum. The occasion was the capturing of UCI and "sit-in" by the SDS (a young socialist group). The school shut down while it was under siege. I sneaked in, hoping to address a group of hundreds of university students about a *greater* revolution than socialism.

5 I must admit, she has that proverbial Irish temperament, too. After almost twenty years of living with her, I wouldn't want it any other way.

6 Andy's nick name. Since he was about four years old, he has imitated the sounds of the beaker on the PBS program, Sesame Street.

7 The first case reported in America (1934) was so mild, in fact, that the child died before the parents suspected anything worthy of a doctor's attention.

8 Along these lines, Vern Poythress read a paper at ETS last November in which he affirmed the miraculous among cessationists. Part of his argument was to note that cessationists in the 19th century sensed God's presence and saw his works in ways that are not nearly as frequent among cessationists today.

Source: http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=1548#P69_26262#P69_26262

Daniel B. Wallace's book, *Who's Afraid of the Holy Spirit?* is available digitally at the following URL: http://www.bible.org/series.php?series_id=183