

# **A Position Paper Concerning the Continuance Of Revelatory Gifts in the Present Day**

**Approved by the Messengers of the Churches in General Assembly**

## Introduction

In light of present-day claims for the continuance of revelatory gifts, even by those who believe in a closed canon and who profess the Reformed faith, it is incumbent upon CBA to publish its position on such matters for greater understanding and unity among its member churches. The position adopted by CBA will be used to inform and examine those churches seeking membership, to establish a standard in controversy should it arise in member churches, to serve as a standard for materials published by CBA, and to examine home and foreign missionaries supported by CBA churches.

As a confessional body, the purpose of this position paper is to identify and clarify the statements contained in the 1689 London Baptist Confession dealing with the stated issues, to answer questions concerning what positions we affirm and deny from a confessional basis, and to preserve the unity of the churches in a controversial day. It is always understood that Scripture must be the final authority over the conscience on this issue. However, the member churches of CBA have already confessed that the LBC is a faithful summary of what Scripture teaches and that subscription to it is the basis for our unity as an association of churches. Detailed issues of exegesis can be addressed in messages delivered at our convention or in suggested reading. This is why this position paper deals more with the exposition and application of the LBC to this issue rather than a lengthy exegesis of Scripture. A selected bibliography is supplied as resources for further study.

The positions addressed in this paper will include those held by (1) the Pentecostal/Charismatic community, (2) Reformed believers who hold to a closed canon yet believe in continued prophecy in some form, (3) Reformed believers who hold to a cessationist view yet accept an “open view” to future revelation and/or signs, (4) Reformed believers who hold to a cessationist view yet who believe that God has given some extraordinary experiences to some good men in the past, (5) Reformed believers who may use careless wording to describe Holy Spirit illumination, and (6) Reformed believers who accept a full cessationist view.

- I. First, what does the LBC have to say about the cessation of objective revelation, the doctrine of illumination, and the possibility of revelatory gifts continuing beyond the close of the canon?
  1. LBC 1:1 – “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience...Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church;...commit[ting] the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.”

Commentary:

This first paragraph in the confession identifies the Holy Scripture as the only sufficient, infallible rule both for salvation and sanctification (obedience). This comprehends all matters of faith and life. It further states that the “divers manners” in which God revealed himself and his will to his church are now ceased, having been committed “wholly” to writing. This simply means that all methods of revelation used to reveal Himself to His people are now terminated. This does not mean that every revelation which God gave to His people by “divers manners” has been written down, but only that which God deemed necessary for “his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life (1:6).” Just because a revelation may not have been inscripturated does not mean that it is a “lesser revelation.” Therefore, the “divers manners” and “former ways” which God used to reveal Himself and His will to His people have now ceased. By definition, this includes direct verbal communication, theophanies, prophecy, dreams, visions, gifts of healing in association with revelation, prophetic and apostolic writings, tongues, the interpretation of tongues, and any other supernatural method used to reveal Himself or to declare His will to his church before the close of the canon. None would deny that God still performs miracles today in answer to prayer, but the LBC does not allow for individuals today with the gift of healing present in apostolic days. As was done throughout Scripture, miraculous signs were given through individuals to testify to the revelation given (John 20:30-31; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:1-4).

2. LBC 1:6 – “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word...”

Commentary:

According to this paragraph, there is a difference between Holy Spirit revelation and Holy Spirit illumination. The point is that the Holy Scripture is so complete that it reveals the “whole counsel of God” for all things necessary for His glory and man’s salvation, faith, and life. This comprehensive description of Scripture certainly includes salvation, sanctification, and all categories necessary for the believer’s life. Therefore, no new revelations are needed beyond Scripture and none are to be added to the Scripture. This includes supposed “new revelation of the Spirit” and traditions of men. If modern revelations were still received, they could not be valid if they related to salvation, sanctification, obedience, faith, or life. Obviously, there is nothing left to reveal until Jesus comes. However, it is recognized that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is needed to understand savingly the revelation of the written Word. Illumination is not the same as objective revelation.

3. LBC 1:9 – “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched by other places that speak more clearly.”

Commentary:

If Scripture alone is the unique and final revelation of God, and it reveals His whole counsel for salvation, faith, and life, then no infallible interpreter of Scripture exists but Scripture itself. This eliminates the modern-day claim of inspired, authoritative interpreting of Scripture by continuing revelatory gifts such as prophecy, tongues, or gifts of interpretation. For someone to claim that “God told me what the passage means” is to ignore Scripture as its own final interpreter. However, Holy Spirit illumination when comparing Scripture with Scripture is not the same as these former revelatory gifts, which are now ceased.

4. LBC 1:10 – “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentences we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved.”

Commentary:

There can be no further revelations of God which carry any level of authority for our faith than that which has already been delivered by the Spirit in Holy Scriptures. All decrees, opinions, doctrines, and private spirits are to be examined by Holy Scripture alone as the supreme judge of God’s revelation and truth. Faith is resolved in understanding and believing what the Scripture teaches.

5. LBC 8:8 – “To all those for whom Christ hath obtained eternal redemption, he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same, making intercession for them; uniting them to himself by his Spirit, revealing unto them, in and by the Word, the mystery of salvation, persuading them to believe and obey, governing their hearts by his Word and Spirit,…”

Commentary:

Here the LBC uses “revealing unto them,” not in the sense of objective revelation used to describe the Scripture, but in the subjective sense of “revealing” the objective revelation of Scripture to the soul of man in effectual calling. This applicatory, or subjective, “revelation” would comprehend illumination and regeneration as part of that “revealing unto them,” yet not being objective revelation in the sense of Scripture or former revelatory gifts.

6. LBC 10:1 – “...enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God...”

Commentary:

Again, this enlightening of the mind in effectual calling, or illumination, is referenced by Eph. 1:17-18. In this text, Paul prays for Christians that God the Father would give them “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation” in the knowledge of God, that they might know the things freely given them by God. Once again, this use of the term “revelation” refers to the illumination to Christians of truth already revealed, not the revealing of new truths by formerly used revelatory gifts.

7. LBC 18:3 – “This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before

he be partaker of it; yet being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of means, attain thereunto:..."

Commentary:

The attainment of an infallible assurance does not come by extraordinary revelation once given by revelatory gifts, but by the Spirit illuminating the means God has already given; i.e., Scripture, prayer, sacraments, etc. This prohibits the dependence upon revelatory gifts, other persons, or extraordinary experiences to attain infallible assurance.

8. LBC 22:1 – “But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.”

Commentary:

The doctrine of the regulative principle of worship requires the prescription of Scripture for any element of worship. The practice of continued revelatory gifts in worship, or their revealing of new forms of worship, undermines the finality of Scripture as the source of revelation for regulated worship. Such gifts further undermine the authority of elders who are without such gifts. Should a difference arise between the authorized elders’ teaching and advice versus the subject matter of a prophecy, which should the believer follow? Especially, when the supposed prophecy may or may not be delivered accurately? This continued use of revelatory gifts ultimately undermines a stable ecclesiology as well as the regulative principle of worship. Therefore, by definition, the regulative principle of worship in the LBC, and the description of Scripture as “the whole counsel of God,” prohibits the continued use of revelatory gifts once used to give us Scripture as the objective revelation of God.

II. Second, what does the LBC have to say about the above six views concerning the continuation of revelatory gifts and new revelations beyond the canon of Scripture?

1. First, the LBC leaves no room for the typical Pentecostal/Charismatic views. Prophecy, dreams, visions, tongues, interpretation of tongues, inspired writing, apostles, prophets, and any other revelatory gifts which brought objective revelation from God have ceased. This position is not acceptable for a pastor, missionary, or church in association with CBA.
2. Second, the LBC allows no room for the position of some Reformed believers who hold to a closed canon, yet who believe in continued prophecy in some form. This idea is sometimes presented as a difference between the infallible prophecy used for the objective revelation of Scripture and a lesser “congregational prophecy” which may be in error because of flawed communication through present-day vessels. Too much is made of Agabus’ prophecy as an example of prophecy only for local congregations. After all, it was recorded in Scripture. Further, some use Agabus as an example of prophecy which may not be communicated accurately by the vessel. The prophecy of Agabus has, by no

means, been proved flawed. This is a very hermeneutically flawed argument, using a disputed historical text to establish a doctrine of continued lesser congregational prophecy.

Along with this view is the possibility of visions, dreams, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and words of wisdom as present-day revelations of God, yet not equal to the infallible revelations of Scripture because the vessel may not understand or communicate them accurately. This very argument has been used by some liberal theologians who hold to a form of biblical inspiration yet who deny inerrancy. As John A. T. Robinson once remarked, “I believe that John wrote the Gospel, but who can trust the memory of an old man.” There is little difference between Robinson’s view of inspired erroneous Scripture and this other view of possibly erroneous prophecy. What if the believer is prophesied to act upon a choice of an available job or marriage partner when he is still unlearned in many Scriptures having to do with guidance? Especially, when the prophecy may prove wrong over time? He is forced to choose on the basis of the possibly wrong prophecy instead of relying wholly on the Scripture alone.

The adoption of this lesser prophecy view will ultimately undermine the priority of and the dependence upon *sola scriptura*. Also, it may create a contradiction between wise counsel from ordained elders versus possibly erroneous prophecy, undermining biblical ecclesiology. Thus, according to this view, there may be continued revelations through revelatory gifts, yet the canon of Scripture is closed as the only infallible and inerrant revelation of God. The LBC, however, includes prophecy and other revelatory gifts as having ceased since Scripture is closed. This position is not acceptable for a pastor, missionary, or church in association with CBA.

3. Third, some Reformed believers hold to a cessationist view, yet accept an “open view” to future revelation and/or revelatory gifts and signs. This view does not necessarily believe that revelatory gifts are active today or ever will be again. However, because of the humble desire of not wanting to limit Almighty God in what He may choose to do in the future, they prefer to keep an “open view.” Others hold to this “open view” in relation to certain post-millennial views of a possible revival of revelatory gifts in millennial days. There have been some in the past who held to one of these open views yet who also held to the Westminster or London Confessions. However, the open view which desires to be careful from limiting God in the future cannot be held consistently, simply because the LBC is clear, declaring that “those former ways of God’s revealing his will to his people now being ceased (1:1).” We cannot allow the sincere inconsistencies of good men in the past to redefine the plain statements of the LBC. Neither did they have to clarify their positions in the light of today’s worldwide, widespread, growing errors.

The post-millennial view is more difficult to dismiss in the light that the LBC is sufficiently broad to allow some post-millennial positions. However, the LBC also seems to be clear that the period of time between the close of the canon and the unexpected return of Christ on the last day (31:2,3; 32:3) is the period covered by “those former ways of God revealing himself to his people now being ceased (1:1).” The unexpected description of our Lord’s return in the LBC does not

allow for an increased expectedness based upon a revival of revelatory gifts. Indeed, the unexpected return of our Lord is identified as the next “revelation.” Therefore, neither “open view” is acceptable for pastors, missionaries, or churches in membership with CBA.

4. Fourth, there are some Reformed believers who adhere to a strict cessationism, and who deny the continuance of the revelatory gifts, yet who cannot deny that some extraordinary events have occurred in history to faithful Reformed men. Some Reformed men of the past have reported extraordinary events in their lives which seem to mimic the revelatory gifts mentioned in Scripture. Reported occurrences include specific knowledge of unknowable circumstances beyond normal illumination of Scripture, or unusual knowledge of God’s immediate will and guidance for their labors, or predictions of the future which have come true.

It is reported that Hanserd Knollys once healed Benjamin Keach and predicted that he would live longer than Knollys, which he did. Spurgeon reported in his autobiography (vol. 2, p. 59-61) of two incidents wherein he preached that someone was present in disguise, only to be informed by a woman on each occasion that they were present in disguise so that no one would know their presence. On another occasion, he pointed a finger at a portion of the assembly where a young man sat and said: “Young man, those gloves you are wearing have not been paid for: you have stolen them from your employer.” Following the service, a young man visited him, laid the gloves on his desk, and confessed to the crime. Other reports of extraordinary predictions in church history have been reported by George Gillespie, even by some of the reformers (Works, vol. 2, chap. 5, sec. 7, p. 30).

As difficult as it is to explain such events, these occurrences still were not performed by “prophets” as described in the New Testament, nor did these experiences fit the regular practice of prophecy in congregational worship (1 Cor. 14), which some are claiming today. Neither did these men foster the use of such gifts nor attempt to restore them to the church as is done today in “restorationism.” Such extraordinary occurrences, or opinions, or errors of good men must not be used to modify the plain words of the LBC. For one to believe that there may have been extraordinary experiences by good men in the past which seem to mimic, at times, revelatory gifts in the New Testament, does not necessarily mean that one believes that the revelatory gifts still exist as formerly practiced. Those who accept these extraordinary experiences of good men require patience by CBA when examining their view to see if they believe in continued gifts of the above mentioned “open view,” which may not be the case. However, there must be a rejection of continued revelatory gifts to conform to the LBC for membership and service in CBA.

5. Fifth, there are some Reformed believers who may use careless wording to describe Holy Spirit illumination, even though they accept the full cessationist position of the LBC. For instance, some Puritans applied the term “prophecy” to what was considered Spirit-filled preaching. At times, Luther, Calvin, and Knox carelessly have been termed “Apostle.” Others today may use such phrases as: “The Lord told me...The Lord revealed to me...God spoke to me...God said to me...etc.” Such language simply may be an expression of Holy Spirit

illumination and application of God's truth to the mind, expressed in confusing or careless terms because of the widespread use of such language in the Christian culture. Higher Life theology has spread the use of such language in America, as well as charismatic theology.

Such language simply may be careless or it may express a real belief in immediate revelation, or an unbiblical mysticism based upon subjective feelings, or an attitude bordering on belief in continued revelatory gifts. In such cases, charity needs to be given until further understanding of another's position is clarified. The LBC used the term "revealed" when explaining effectual calling (8:8). The Scripture sometimes uses "revelation" to describe the subjective apprehension of Scriptural revelation (Matt. 11:25,27; Matt. 16:17; Luke 10:21,22; Gal. 1:16; Eph. 1:16-18; Phil. 3:15). In this latter sense, "revelation" continues today, yet not that revelation based upon revelatory gifts. Therefore, because of the confusion and errors today, a clear distinction needs to be made between objective revelation of truth and the subjective illumination or apprehension of that truth by the Holy Spirit. Further, there needs to be more discussion with those who use such unclear or careless wording, as well the possibility of further instruction if so needed. This view requires communication, charity, discussion, patience, and possible instruction for those desiring membership in CBA before proceeding further.

6. Sixth, the position of CBA is that the LBC expresses a full cessationist view with no room for the first three views mentioned. The continuation of objective revelation or revelatory gifts is rejected as opposed to the LBC and a danger to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Therefore, pastors, missionaries, and churches who are in association with CBA must express agreement with this position.

Of the above six positions, the first three are not acceptable to CBA membership. The last is the closest to the clear statements of the LBC. The remaining two, numbers four and five, may or may not reveal satisfactory conformity to the LBC. Charity and patience, together with opportunity for more communication, need to be practiced when considering pastors, missionaries, and churches for membership in CBA.

III. Third, the above commentary on the LBC enables us to make the following affirmations and denials concerning the issue of continued revelation and/or continued revelatory gifts beyond the closed canon of Scripture.

1. First, we affirm *sola scriptura* as the clear position of the LBC identifying the only source of objective and propositional revelation of God to man today. We deny the continuation of objective revelation in any form, "Those former ways of God's revealing his will to his people, now being ceased (1:1)."
2. Second, we affirm the cautious use of the term "revealed (8:8)" when used of the Holy Spirit's work in effectual calling and when used to describe Holy Spirit illumination and application of Scripture. We deny that the Holy Spirit reveals new objective revelation to the believer in any sense, even concerning extraordinary occurrences reported by Reformed men.

3. Third, we affirm that the former ways of God's revealing himself and his will to his people includes prophecy, visions, dreams, theopanies, tongues, interpretation of tongues, written revelations, etc. We deny that modern-day claims of these revelatory gifts and ways are valid.
4. Fourth, we affirm that the gift of tongues was foreign languages and was revelatory in content. We deny that this gift was other than foreign languages or that it was a private prayer language.
5. Fifth, we affirm the continued illumination of the Holy Spirit concerning written revelation, including the cautious use of "revealed" and "revelation" when referring to such illumination. We deny that Holy Spirit illumination of objective revelation can in any sense reveal new revelations of God's truth.
6. Sixth, we affirm that the final authoritative interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. We deny that any claimed direct revelatory interpretations of Scripture by the Holy Spirit can carry final authority when interpreting the meaning of any Scripture.
7. Seventh, we affirm the right to explore one's position on continued revelation and revelatory gifts from the Scripture. We deny the right to become or continue as a pastor, missionary, or member church of CBA should one teach the continued validity of or begin the practice of supposed revelatory gifts.

IV. Fourth, in the light of the present-day spread of erroneous views, what should be the stated practice of CBA concerning the examination of candidate churches and the discipline of member churches concerning the issue of continued revelation or revelatory gifts?

1. First, the examination of candidate pastors, missionaries, and member churches should include questioning concerning one's position on this issue, including the reading and discussion of this position paper.
2. Second, should a candidate pastor, missionary, or church be uncertain of which view they hold to, time should be allowed to read relevant works and further discuss the issue with the membership committee.
3. Third, should a member pastor, missionary, or church begin to take a different position than CBA's view, the pastor or missionary should notify the elders of the responsible church in order to resolve the issue internally. The elders may request assistance from CBA for instruction and guidance. Should a member church refuse to remove its erring pastor or missionary, or should it change its position, or should it begin to practice such [biblically discontinued] revelatory gifts, it is obligated to notify CBA and to begin discussions for communication, instruction, and resolution of the matter. Should a satisfactory return to CBA's position not be achieved, the church will be requested to withdraw its membership in CBA or else CBA will be forced to withdraw association with that church. In all cases, patience, charity, and brotherly concern should be displayed on all sides.



V. Fifth, the following is a Recommended Bibliography for those considering this matter.

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2. Chantry, Walter, *Signs of the Apostles* (BT)
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4. Ferguson, Sinclair, *The Holy Spirit* (IVP)
5. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (B)
6. Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*
7. Hulse, Erroll, *Reformation Today*, #164 on cessationism
8. Judish, Doug, *Cessation of Gifts* (B)
9. MacArthur, John, *Charismatic Chaos*
10. Reymond, Robert, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*
11. Robertson, O. Palmer, *The Final Word* (BT)
12. Smith, Morton, *Systematic Theology* (Greenville Seminary Press)

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