

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY: IS IT FOR TODAY?

I. Introduction

According to their training manual, Mormon missionaries are instructed that the first step to winning converts to their faith is to create the need for a prophet. Ironically, there are a growing number of evangelicals, some with impressive academic credentials, that are saying something similar. (See *Why Christians can still Prophesy*. **CHRISTIANITY TODAY**, Sept. 16, 1988.) *The gift of prophecy*, these advocates say, *should be revived as it was in the First Century Church*. What is noteworthy is that many of these scholars formerly believed that the spectacular gifts, such as prophecy, ceased near the end of the First Century.

II. Brief Statement of the View that Prophecy is for the Church Today

- A. The Uniformitarian Principle: Just as the spiritual gifts (all of them) functioned in the early church so should they function today. They would argue: *If they were needed then, so they are needed today*. They would even go so far as to say that the reason the church has failed to carry out the Great Commission is because it neglected the supernatural gifts. They cite evidence showing rapid church growth wherever all the gifts of the Spirit are operational.

According to these teachers the gift of prophecy should be exercised in local church bodies today as it was in the early church. The gift of prophecy (as well as the other *power gifts*) did not cease when the last book of the Bible was written, or after the deaths of the Apostles. Rather, it was rarely seen during times of spiritual decay and apostasy, or accounts were simply not recorded (note: one writer, i.e., Jack Deere, believes accounts of the prophetic gifts were even suppressed). According to some in this camp, we are now experiencing an outpouring of these gifts, including prophecy, due to the nearness of a great revival and Christ's return. Other advocates say they are reappearing due to the recovery of truth about the gifts (see Grudem's book).

- B. There are Two Levels of Prophecy in the New Testament

1. The first is that exercised by the Apostles. Their office and gift is in direct continuity to the prophets in the Old Testament. They functioned as God's mouthpiece. When they spoke prophetically (*Thus saith the Lord*) it was

the very words of God; it was infallible and was to be obeyed (see Deut. 18:15-19). Some of the revelations they received from God (like the 39 books of the OT) were written down and are universally applicable. Hence the 27 books of the NT are likewise infallible, authoritative and universally applicable.

2. After Pentecost, and due the fulfillment of Joel 2:28 in Acts 2:17, all members of the Body, not just the Apostles, could now exercise the gift of prophecy. However, when a non-apostle exercised the gift the revelation was fallible and did not come with the same authority. It was this use of the gift that was being abused in the Corinthian church (as well as tongues, a form of prophecy). When an ordinary member of the Body exercises this gift the prophecy comes from the same God of truth, but in the process of human transmission it can degenerate to a mistaken or distorted report of that revelation. Grudem believes the gift is exercised when a believer shares a message with the Body he believes the Lord has spontaneously brought to mind. This prophecy does not have to be obeyed as it would if it had come from an Apostle, rather it has to be weighted in the light of other teachings. The purpose of these prophecies may be to encourage, exhort to some action, or they may be predictive (though fallible). They may come to a believer through his thoughts, or via visions, dreams, or by angelic visitation. Grudem, for the most part, downplays the supernatural; for others, it is emphasized. For example, the most popular manifestation is when the gifted individual receives a *word of knowledge* about someone in the body. A name is called out followed by a prophecy, usually the naming of an illness of which the person will be shortly healed. (See the book: **SOME SAID IT THUNDERED** for specific examples.)

III. The Controversy

Two important doctrinal issues are at stake:

A. The Sufficiency and Authority of Scripture

Does God speak propositionally (thoughts expressed in words) today apart from the Bible? Since the Reformation it has been the consensus among Protestants that God's revelatory activity ceased with the last book of the New Testament. This doctrine was known as *sola scriptura* (*the Bible alone.*); Only the 66 books of the Bible were the inscripturated words of God and they alone had absolute authority.

B. The Nature of Our Mystical Relationship to Christ (Illumination)

The believer's relationship with the person of Christ is said to be at a mystical level. He speaks to us and guides us through His Word as it is illumined by the Holy Spirit. This illumination may take the form of promptings, impressions, leadings, conviction, etc., but does not come in verbal propositions. This movement though, claims it can be propositional as long as nothing contradicts what is already in Scripture. It is revelation, they say, but is personal and is not universally applicable, and therefore, does not have absolute authority. Personal guidance is seen at a new level as God may give personal direction through visions, dreams, or from the prophetic ministry of others in the Body.

IV. The Development of the Movement to Re-institute the Gift of Prophecy

A. The idea that God can speak through prophets today is a resident idea of classical Pentecostalism (The First Wave) from early in this century. It was also a belief of the Charismatic Movement of the 70's (The Second Wave) which swept through old line denominational churches and even the Roman Catholic church. More recently, the Vineyard Movement (also The Signs and Wonders Movement, or the Third Wave) has argued for the re-institution of the prophetic gifts more vigorously through the publication of persuasive books containing both argument and anecdote.

B. Major Spokespersons in the Current Movement

1. John Wimber, the founder and *ipso facto* bishop of the Vineyard Movement, believes that for the church to thrive and accomplish its task (The Great Commission), all the spiritual gifts mentioned in the NT should be operative in every worship service. For a good overview of the Signs and Wonders Movement see D.A. Carson's article: *The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament*, in **POWER RELIGION**, edited by Michael Scott Horton, and, *An Appraisal of the Signs and Wonders Movement*. by Ken L. Sarles in **BIBLIOTHECA SACRA**, Jan-Mar, 1988.
2. Wayne Grudem is Research professor of Bible and theology Phoenix Seminary, and author of **THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND TODAY**. This book is probably the single most influential source of the movement.

3. Jack Deere was formerly a professor at Dallas Seminary. He is author of two books (listed below) which argue persuasively for the re-institution of the *power gifts* in the Body of Christ. The books tell of his own experiences that led to his change of conviction.
4. The Kansas City Prophets are a group of men who claim to be prophetically gifted and have attained some notoriety from a best-selling book: ***SOME SAID IT THUNDERED***, by David Pytches. These men are: Paul Cain, John Paul Jackson, and Bob Jones. See also Chapter 8 of ***HOLY LAUGHTER AND THE TORONTO BLESSING***, by James A. Beverly.

V. The Case for the Revival of the Gift of Prophecy

A. The Eschatological Argument

This is happening because we are living in the last days. Those of a more classical Pentecostal background, and those from the Charismatic Movement argue that the increase in the prophetic gift is due to the nearness of Christ's return. Indeed many of the prophecies seem somehow related to this apocalyptic event. Some have even predicted that there would be a large out-pouring of Apostles in the end-times. This seems to be logically consistent with the view that all the gifts should be operational. If prophets, why not apostles?

B. The Historical Argument

The use of these gifts never ceased. Deere and others argue that the gift of prophecy never completely ceased throughout 2000 years of church history. Deere, in ***SURPRISED BY THE VOICE OF GOD*** gives evidence of the use of prophetic gifts among the leaders of the Scottish Reformation. He even gives an example of the great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, exercising the gift (***SURPRISED BY THE VOICE OF GOD***, p.89).

C. The Argument from Experience

I know God speaks prophetically today because I've witnessed or experienced it. Most of the books (with the exception of Grudem) by volume are filled with contemporary anecdotes of the exercise of the *power gifts*. For advocates of this position, the experience itself is powerful and overwhelming. By its very nature, experience cannot be denied (because it's personal). However,

when a group has confirming experiences it becomes a strong movement. The argument would be thus: *Look how the church is growing. Look how many people are being ministered to.*

D. Exegetical Arguments (based on the original language of the New Testament)

Grudem believes the gift of prophecy, when exercised by an Apostle, was infallible. When an ordinary member of the body exercised the gift, the result was fallible. He believes this two-tiered view of the gift of prophecy is supported by the following arguments:

1. Eph.2:20. God's household is *built on a foundation of apostles and prophets*. Grudem argues that the Greek here can be taken as *apostles who are prophets*, or, as *apostle-prophets*. He maintains that this combination should be taken the same way as in 4:11, where pastors and teachers are one class, i.e., pastor-teachers. In other words, the foundation equals *just* apostles, not one of apostles *and* prophets.
2. The meaning of the word *prophet* in the NT had a broad range of meanings. In the OT the word for *prophet* was fairly specific; it implied *a person who spoke the very words of God by supernatural means*. Grudem, however, believes the NT word for *prophet* had a very broad range of meaning, and this is why Jesus called His disciples Apostles and not prophets. He believes *prophet* meant someone who spoke according to an outside influence or was simply a *spokesman*.
3. In Acts 21:4ff. a prophet named Agabus and *some others* gave a prophecy warning Paul not to enter Jerusalem less he be bound by the Jews and delivered to the Romans. Grudem believes that Paul perceived that the prophecy was slightly inaccurate, and therefore, disobeyed the command not to enter the City. The error was in the agent of the binding. It was the Romans and not the Jews. He concludes that this is an example of a fallible NT prophecy.
4. According to I Cor. 14:30, one prophet could interrupt another. Grudem believes that if this were a prophet of the OT order, or an Apostle, you would not dare interrupt the very words of God as they were being spoken.
5. I Cor. 14:29 reads: *And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgement*. Grudem believes *the others* refers in general to

the Body, and the fact that they could stand in judgement indicated that it was not inspired, or infallible prophecy.

6. In the OT a prophecy was prefaced by the formula: *Thus saith the Lord*. Grudem maintains that non-apostolic prophecy did not come with this preface. He also urges contemporary prophets not to say *This is from the Lord* when they prophesy.
7. I Cor. 13:9-10. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears." Grudem believes *but when perfection comes*, can be translated *but when the perfect comes*, and, that this refers to the second coming of Christ (as in the KJV and NASV). He thus concludes that the prophetic gifts will not cease until then and should be operative today.

VI. Response to Grudem

Some Observations:

- A. Most of Grudem's above arguments are possible interpretations. However, taken together they represent the more abnormal or unusual way of interpreting the Greek grammatical constructions. If only one or two of his arguments were the unusual reading, Grudem might have a strong case. The fact is, nearly all of his renderings are the more irregular or rare ones. It is our humble opinion that given the way Grudem strains to conclude that there is a two-tiered exercising of the gift of prophecy, that his (and others) exegesis seems to be experience-driven. If it is not driven by experience, it still seems forced.
- B. In Grudem's first argument (#1 above) we believe he misapplies the Granville Sharp rule to plural nouns (for Greek students). Also, in the same epistle (4:11) prophets are seen as definitely distinct from apostles. He does however, conclude that only the Apostles were the foundation of the church, and he believes the office of Apostle was only for the beginning period of the church. But why, in the light of his interpretation of I Cor. 13:10? This appears to be inconsistent. Why should the gift of Apostle not continue until Christ's return? (See his argument #7)
- C. He fails, in our opinion (#2 above), to demonstrate the broad meaning of *prophet* as it is used in the NT. By his definition of what a prophecy would be in today's church, a testimony would qualify. If a person feels led of the

Lord to stand up in the Body and give a testimony, that would appear to qualify as a prophecy according to Grudem in his article in **CHRISTIANITY TODAY** (see below).

- D. The case of Agabus (#3 above) is a major point for Grudem, and it is on this that his argument could stand or fall. We feel the argument for Agabus giving a fallible prophecy just does not hold. Earlier in the book of Acts, the same prophet predicts a famine which Luke notes is exactly fulfilled (see Acts 11:27ff. Note that the writer specifically says he *prophesied through the Spirit*). Agabus is not in error to say the Jews bound Paul, when indeed it was the Romans who actually did the binding, anymore than Peter would be wrong to say that the Jews crucified Jesus even though it was literally done by the soldiers (Acts 5:30). The fact that seems to totally negate this argument is the formula used by Agabus. *The Holy Spirit says*, is the *Thus saith the Lord* of the OT. The Holy Spirit is a member of the Trinity! Note also that this is recorded as Scripture. Why Paul did not obey the command not to enter Jerusalem is a mystery, and Grudem is right to bring it up. On the other hand, it is not our task to defend the actions of the Apostles!
- E. I Cor.14:29ff.(#4 above). Because the prophets could interrupt each other does not necessarily mean that it was prophecy of a lesser order. What the preceding context shows is that the gift was under the control of the prophets' will and not as the ecstatic gifts of the pagans. Paul is simply saying that if a prophet is from God, he will maintain conscious control of his faculties. If it is from God, it can wait. That is the force behind the command to speak in turn. If two or three have already spoken he can wait until the next meeting.
- F. I Cor. 14:29 (#5 above). The *others* of this passage could have just as easily been the other prophets or those with the gift of discernment. It definitely fits the context better. The force of the passage is then that the prophets should judge each other. Remember, false prophets were a major problem in the church. The passage is not teaching that true prophets can give false prophecy. Rather, the problem was false prophets who, on occasion, gave true prophecy (I John 4:1).
- G. I Cor. 13:10 (see #7). The meaning of the Greek word for *perfect* here can just as easily be *maturity*. Paul is then saying that when maturity comes the need for the gift will disappear. This is not a novel or abnormal way to interpret the passage.
- H. Paul is not commanding every one in the congregation to seek additional

gifts of tongues or prophecy in I Cor. 12:31; 14:4,5,39. The command is that the congregation as a whole should seek the greater gifts that will edify the body. Some of the writers who teach that the *power gifts* are for today's church teach that spiritual gifts are given sovereignly at salvation, yet teach that gifts should be sought by individuals. This appears to be contradictory.

VII. Other Questions and Concerns

- A. If the gift is for today it seems strange that a Sovereign Dispenser of gifts would cease giving a gift to the church because the nature of the gift is misconstrued. That is, some teach that the gift was withheld during periods of apostasy and bureaucracy in the church. The question is, why? It is during these times when it was needed more than ever.
- B. Grudem admits that his understanding of the degrees of authority involved in prophetic utterances is somewhat novel. Novelty in itself does not make it wrong. It should raise red flags, however, when we are being asked to re-institute a gift that has great potential to be divisive when the arguments based on exegesis are nowhere near the unequivocal state. Unfortunately, Grudem's book abounds in novel interpretations.
- C. According to this position, prophecy originates in a revelation from the God of truth who cannot lie, but in the process of human transmission the prophecy may degenerate into an erroneous report of that revelation. Why, we might ask, would God give someone a revelation without a guarantee of faithful communication? It raises a lot of other questions. In particular, how is the listener to be guided into truth? Is the hearer the final arbitrator? The elder board? Those in the body who have the gift of discernment? How will we know if the discerners know? How can a gift which is uncertain edify? If you add to the written Word, do you not complicate the issue by having multiple authorities as in the Catholic church? (see briefing #49)
- D. Luke, who wrote a large portion of the NT, was not an apostle, yet we would assume he had a prophetic gift to write Scripture. The writer of the Apocalypse was the Apostle John (we assume), yet he does not invoke his apostleship, and no one would question that he was a prophet. Other writers of the NT were not considered apostles either (Mark, James, Jude, and possibly the author of Hebrews), yet by Grudem's standards these books should not be seen as authoritative.

- E. Note that Paul includes himself among the prophets mentioned in I Cor. 13:9. Why would he do this if the gift as exercised by non-apostles was inferior?
- F. In some respects this view of revelation is reminiscent of the Neo-orthodoxy that arose in Europe following WWII. Major figures of this movement (Barth and Brunner) taught a subjective and existential view of revelation. The revelation came to man but man could never communicate it exactly as given. Hence the Bible was only a fallible record of revelation. Those of the current movement to revive the gift of prophecy seem to be saying something similar: *The Word comes to man in an infallible manner, but the prophet hears it imperfectly and can err in its interpretation.* One wonders why an omnipotent God could not preserve it from error?
- G. During the time of the Apostles, God performed mighty miracles through them to authenticate their office and authority (II Cor. 12:12). Could God do miracles today? Yes, if He so chose. We must not be guilty of putting God in a box. Likewise, He might choose to use a saint on occasion to give an accurate prophecy as He may have done during the Scottish Reformation or through the great preacher Spurgeon. But we should not conclude these men were prophets. The NT prophets regularly practiced their gift in the Body.
- H. Our final nagging question is: did this two-tiered view of prophecy evolve to cover for the phenomenon of fallible prophecy as it is exercised today? Did the cart come before the horse? Did the experience come before the mandate from the Word? Despite denials, it seems so.

VII. Conclusion

The men who challenge the Church to revive the gift of prophesy have good intentions. They want to see significant growth in the Kingdom; they want to see believers have a vital mystical relationship to Christ in a materialistic age. They are not heretics, but they are proposing major doctrinal shifts that we sincerely believe will lead to confusion and dangerous consequences. Regardless of the spectacular experiences being reported by godly men, we must resist the temptation to satisfy our spiritual thirst for anything other than the certainty of the written Word of God.

For Further Study:

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