

Spiritual Gifts, Part 2

Prophecy

[Brian Schwertley](#)

The gift that Paul places immediately after “apostle” is that of prophet (see 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11). New Testament prophets, just like their Old Testament counterparts, received direct revelation from God which was then communicated to the people of God. Prophets are listed alongside the apostles as part of the new covenant foundation because they, along with the apostles, revealed mysteries to the church long hidden; giving us crucial sections of the New Testament (e.g., Mark, Luke, Acts).

We will learn much about New Testament prophets as we interact with the very popular Pentecostal view of this subject. Charismatic churches teach that the prophetic gift is still in operation today. That is, there are men and women who are receiving direct revelations from God. However, most Charismatic churches have a very schizophrenic view regarding this gift. On the one hand, they claim that divine revelation is not closed but continues. Yet, on the other hand they want to maintain the unique authority of Scripture. Thus, what is supposedly direct revelation from God is not treated the same as the Bible. Modern prophecy is treated as a secondary form of revelation that cannot be trusted. In Charismatic churches prophecy is not treated as an authoritative or binding “thus saith the Lord,” but as a vague exhortation or simply an exciting part of the service (like a music soloist). Charismatic intellectuals have even attempted to justify existing Charismatic practice by developing the notion that New Testament prophecy is different than Old Testament prophecy; that it is a lesser form of revelation. Is New Testament prophecy different than Old Testament prophecy? Is it somehow a lesser form of revelation? In order to answer these questions, we must first ask what is prophecy?

In order to disprove the popular Charismatic conception of the New Testament prophet as giving forth revelation that is something less than Scripture, we must examine the continuity between the Old Testament prophet and the New Testament prophet. The passage which sets forth the divine legislation which defined the office of prophet is Deuteronomy 18. Note that the true prophet speaks the very words of God: whatever the Lord has commanded him to speak. “The prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die. And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him” (Deut. 18:20-22).

There are two methods for determining a true prophet. First, the prophet must speak in the name of the true God—that is, the prophet must have correct theology. Second, whatever the prophet prophesies must come to pass with 100% accuracy—anything less demanded death by

stoning. If someone claims to have the gift of prophecy yet never gives a specific prophecy by which that prophet can be objectively tested, we have absolutely no reason to believe or fear that so called “prophet.” What gave the Old Testament prophets unique authority and objective validation, even to unbelievers, was the fact that what they said truly came to pass. Without the specific predictive element, the prophets would have been no more than teachers of the law.

The test of a true prophet also applies to New Testament prophets, for there is a definite continuity between the Old Testament prophet and New Testament prophet. After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church, Peter quoted the prophet Joel: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams.... I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy” (Ac. 2:17-18). Note that the New Testament prophet was involved in exactly the same phenomena associated with the Old Testament prophet: dreams, visions, and prophecy (cf. Num. 12:6). “Thus we have prophecy of the Old Testament type (familiar Old Testament prophetic modes) entering into the New Testament era, and in fulfillment of a specific Old Testament prophet’s word. And this is according to Peter’s divinely inspired interpretation of Joel.”¹ This continuation of Old Testament prophecy into the New is confirmed by the New Testament prophet Agabus. Agabus spoke the very words of the Holy Spirit. By speaking God’s words, Agabus, like the Old Testament prophet, revealed the future. “A certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, “So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver [him] into the hands of the Gentiles”’” (Ac. 21:10-11).

That the New Testament prophet actually speaks direct words from God, and is not merely a teacher or preacher, is supported by Paul: “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries...” (1 Cor. 13:2). The word “mystery” in the New Testament does not mean the same thing as our English word. Edwards writes, “In the NT the word occurs 27 or...28 [times]; chiefly in Paul....It bears its ancient sense of a revealed secret, not its modern sense of that which cannot be fathomed or comprehended....By far the most common meaning in the NT is that which is so characteristic of Paul, viz., a Divine truth once hidden, but now revealed in the gospel....It should be noted how closely “mystery” is associated with “revelation”...as well as with words of similar import....“Mystery” and “revelation” are in fact correlative and almost synonymous terms....”² The prophet reveals to the church a mystery or mysteries from God. He reveals something previously unknown, something new revealed for the first time.

Paul specifically says in 1 Corinthians 14 that prophets receive “revelation”: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent” (1 Cor. 14:30; cf. v. 26, “has a revelation”). “Revelation (*apokalupsis*), [is] a disclosure of something that was before unknown; and divine revelation is the direct

¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem* (Memphis: Footstool, 1989), 54.

² D. Miall Edwards, “Mystery,” in James Orr, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 3:2104-2105, 24.

communication of truths before unknown from God to men. The disclosure may be made by dreams, visions, oral communication or otherwise (Dan. 2:19; 1 Cor. 14:26; 2 Cor. 12:1; Gal. 1:12; Rev. 1:1).”³ The fact that the New Testament prophetic office is revelatory like the Old Testament office is clearly taught by Paul’s use of “mystery” and “revelation.” Note how he pulls both terms together in Ephesians 3:3-5: “By revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few words, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets.”⁴

Thus, the prophets of God in both the old and new covenants spoke under divine inspiration. They could give fully authoritative pronouncements, such as when the Holy Spirit ordered the church to send out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries. They could by inspiration tell the future (e.g., Agabus). They could speak mysteries. The prophets could literally give the church new authoritative doctrine. The apostles and prophets, by divine inspiration, explained to the church the meaning of Christ’s death. The Holy Spirit revealed to the church that the ceremonial laws of the old covenant were put away, and the middle wall of partition broken down. Thus, God has only one people: those who are in Christ. All the various implications of the cross needed revelational (spirit-inspired) explanation. The reason it is important to define the nature of New Testament prophecy is because most Charismatics, either explicitly or implicitly, regard prophecy as less revelational and authoritative than Scripture. The fact that not all inspired prophetic statements were inscripturated or placed in the canon (the 66 books) is not important to this discussion, because not all the apostles’ inspired statements or writings made it into the canon either (e.g., the lost letter of Paul to the Corinthians). When a Charismatic says that much of what a New Testament prophet does is not predicting the future but giving exhortation, he may be correct. But prophetic exhortation is not just sanctified advice; it is not just the exposition of Scripture. It is Spirit-inspired, revelational exhortation. It has the same authority as Scripture; it is a “thus-saith-the-Lord” exhortation.

This author attended Charismatic churches for over three years and heard hundreds of “prophecies.” Yet never once did he hear new doctrine. In fact, when a “prophet” did speak forth new doctrine, the pastor and elders would tell that “prophet” to cease. In the many instances where “prophets” ordered people to do things (e.g., “Mary, God told me that you should marry John”) people learned quickly that such exhortations should be taken with a large grain of salt! Why? Because modern Charismatic prophets simply cannot be trusted. They are as dependable as a roll of dice. Thus, even most Charismatics do not take their exhortations and prophecies seriously.

³ John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Exegetical Literature* (New York: Harper, 1879), 8:1061.

⁴ “Now in the church in Antioch there were certain prophets....As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, *the Holy Spirit said*, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:1-2). Not only do prophets speak the very Word of God, their inspired utterances carry the full authority of Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit, speaking through prophets, gives a divine imperative (a command). The disciples have no choice but to obey.

Why do Charismatics go out of their way to redefine prophecy as something less than it actually was in the New Testament?⁵ The primary reason is that most Charismatics realize that modern Pentecostal prophecy is really not the same as Old Testament and New Testament prophecy. If Charismatics did not redefine prophecy as basically nothing more than “vague” spiritual exhortations, then their prophets would be subject to objective verification. Compare a typical biblical prophecy with a typical modern Charismatic prophecy. Elijah the Tishbite came and prophesied to evil King Ahab and his wicked wife, Jezebel. Note the specificity: Ahab’s family will be cut off (i.e., murdered; 1 Kgs. 21:21). Ahab’s posterity will be cut off after Ahab is dead (v. 29). Ahab’s wife will be eaten by dogs by the wall of Jezreel (v. 23). In the exact spot where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth (whom Ahab murdered) the dogs will lick up Ahab’s blood. These prophecies were fulfilled perfectly (cf. 1 Kgs. 22:34-39; 2 Kgs. 9:32-37, 10:7-11). After the last of these prophecies was fulfilled, God says: “Know now that nothing shall fall to the earth of the word of the Lord which the Lord spoke concerning the house of Ahab; for the Lord has done what He spoke by His servant Elijah” (2 Kgs. 10:10).

Now compare Elijah’s prophecy to the typical Charismatic “prophecy”: “Oh, come unto Me, my people. If you return to Me, I will bless you. If you come close to Me, I will love you and bless you,” etc. This kind of vague, nonspecific sort of “prophecy” can never be confirmed as real, because it contains nothing specific regarding the future. Moreover, when Charismatics do go out on a limb and get specific, what happens? They are consistently proven wrong, time after time.

With the literally thousands of Charismatic prophets throughout the United States, we should expect to find at least a few that can meet the test of true prophet given in Deuteronomy 18. The truth is that there are no real prophets today, because prophecy, like tongues, ceased when the New Testament Scriptures were completed. Remember that God set up the sign gifts

⁵ The passage in Acts 21:10-11 regarding the binding of Paul is used as a major proof text by those who argue that N.T. prophecy is different than O.T. prophecy; that it is a lesser form of revelation in which inaccuracies (i.e., mistakes) are permissible and even the norm. They argue that both of Agabus’ predictions were not accurate: Paul was *not* “bound” by the Jews and that the Jews did not “deliver” Paul into the hands of the Gentiles. Such a view, however, is overly simplistic and obviously unscriptural for a number of reasons. First, a careful examination of O.T. prophecy reveals that many O.T. prophecies could be disregarded if treated in the same manner as Agabus’ prophecy is treated. John the Baptist is not literally Elijah (cf. Mal. 4:5, Mt. 17:11-12). Second, biblical inerrancy is destroyed if the method of treating Agabus’ prophecy by certain Charismatic scholars is applied to Scripture. Peter said that Judas purchased a field with the silver he received for betraying Christ (Ac. 1:18), yet Mt. 27:3-10 notes that the field was bought after his death by the chief priests with his money. In Acts it repeatedly says that the Jews crucified Christ, yet the gospels make it clear that it was the Romans who actually did the crucifying. Third, the passage specifically says, “Thus says the Holy Spirit” (21:11); this is equivalent to the O.T. “Thus says the LORD.” The idea that the Holy Spirit can lie or make mistakes is blasphemous, for “it is impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). One could argue that Agabus lied when he said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit.” But if Agabus was a liar, then Paul would have rebuked him. It is obvious that Paul and the Jewish church did not regard Agabus’ prophecies as inaccurate or regard Agabus as a liar. Fourth, there is no question that the point of the prophecy (that Paul would be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles) took place perfectly. “The prophecy of Agabus in Acts 21 *was* indeed fulfilled in regard to its *fundamental point*. Paul was bound *because of* the Jews’ resistance to him (cf. Ac. 21:27-31, 35). The Romans would not have physically bound him if the *Jews* had not instigated the uproar that led to his binding” (Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy*, 43). The common Charismatic treatment of this passage is a grasping after straw.

such as tongues, prophecy, dramatic healings, etc., in such a way that they prove publicly the truth of God's Word. That is why the New Testament prophecies, tongues and healings were seen and known to be real by both Christians and unbelievers. Christ's enemies could not deny that Jesus was working amazing public miracles; they were forced to attribute them to Satan (Mt. 12:24). Paul healed a crippled boy publicly; the pagans who observed the miracle could not deny it; they attributed the miracle to their false gods (Ac. 14:11).

The fact that an objective, empirical analysis of modern Charismatic prophecy proves that what is called prophecy today is not the same as New Testament prophecy does not exegetically or logically prove that biblical prophecy has ceased. However, it does prove that modern Charismatic prophecy is a fraud that has nothing to do with what occurred in Scripture. Obviously, the Pentecostal claims regarding their movement as a "latter rain" of the Spirit or a revival of apostolic Christianity are erroneous.

In order to prove that prophecy has ceased with the completion of the canon (the New Testament) one must go to Scripture. There are a number of biblical reasons why prophecy has ceased. (1) As noted in the section on tongues, Paul says explicitly in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 that when the perfect comes that prophecy would cease. Earlier, we demonstrated exegetically that "the perfect" was the completed canon of Scripture. Once the church received everything it needed relating to faith and life in the finalized enscripturated revelation of God the assistance of direct verbal revelation ceased for it had served its purpose and was no longer needed.

Interestingly, it is a fact of history that prophecy did cease with the completion of the Bible. Everyone after the apostolic era who has claimed the gift of prophecy has either been deceived by Satan (e.g., Romanist mystics, the cults [e.g., Joseph Smith], Mohammed, etc.) or has had to *redefine* prophecy to make a second version of it that is less than what is found in Scripture. The latter is precisely what modern Charismatics and the Steelites have done. "From the time of the apostles until the present, the true church has believed the Bible is complete, efficient, sufficient, inerrant, infallible and authoritative. Any attempts to add to the Bible, to claim further revelation from God, have always resulted in cults, heresy, or the weakening of the body of Christ. Although Charismatics will deny that they are trying to add to Scripture, their views on prophetic utterance, gifts of prophecy, and revelation really do just that. As they add—however unwittingly—to God's final revelation, they undermine the uniqueness and authority of the Bible. New revelation, dreams, and visions come to be as binding on the believer's conscience as the Book of Romans or the Gospel of John."⁶

(2) The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit's special revelational ministry in the apostles and the New Testament prophets was foundational and ceased after the completion of the canon. "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22).

⁶ John MacArthur, *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1978), 25.

Before discussing the foundational nature of the New Testament offices of apostle and prophet, we must dispense with the notion that Paul is speaking of Old Testament prophets in verse 20. There are several reasons why “prophets” definitely refers to New Testament prophets. First, note that Paul mentions apostles first and prophets second. When discussing the gifts of the Spirit in the New Testament church, Paul follows a consistent pattern. New Testament apostles are always listed first *before* New Testament prophets. “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets...Are all apostles? Are all prophets?” (1 Cor. 12:28-29). If Paul had been discussing Old Testament prophets, he would logically have placed them before the apostles and not after. Second, the context within the book of Ephesians shows that Paul is speaking of New Testament prophets. “The mystery of Christ...has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” (Eph. 3:4-5). Although Ephesians 3:5 is seven verses after Ephesians 2:20, it is the very next sentence in the Greek. Also, the Greek word *nun* (“now”) cannot refer to Old Testament prophets, because the word refers to a present reality (i.e., when Paul wrote the epistle). Third, in Ephesians 4 Paul says very specifically what he means when he says apostles and prophets. He says that after Christ ascended to the Father, He gave gifts to His church (vs. 7-8). In verse 12 he says that these gifts are “for the edifying of the body of Christ” (i.e., the New Testament church). In verse 11 Paul identifies what these New Testament gifts are: “He gave some to be apostles, some prophets.” “Since the prophets are gifts given, along with the apostles, as a *consequence* of Christ’s victorious ascension, they must be *New Testament* prophets.”⁷ Paul mentions apostles and prophets three times in this short epistle, and each time he obviously means the same thing: *New Testament* apostles and prophets.

Paul says that the New Testament offices of apostle and prophet are foundational to the Christian church. “A foundation, by the very nature of the case, is laid but once, while the superstructure may be erected over a long period of time. In fact, Paul here clearly implies that the foundation is already laid. He says: ‘having been built upon the foundation’ (*epoikodomethentes*). But he goes on to speak of the building presently ‘growing’ (*auxei*) and ‘being built together’ (*sunoikodomeisthe*) on that foundation.”⁸ The picture that Paul sets before us is that of a completed foundation upon which the church of Jesus Christ rests. But the church, unlike the foundation, continues to grow. The verb “to grow” in verse 21 is in the present tense and shows that Christ’s church continues to grow even now.

The offices of apostle and prophet were unique to the situation of the church before the completion of the canon. Revelation was needed to produce the New Testament. And before the New Testament was completed, direct revelation was necessary to explain the work of Christ and to meet contemporary needs. Just imagine what it would be like trying to explain the significance of what Christ did without the New Testament! After the New Testament canon was completed and the last prophet and apostle died, the revelatory gifts ceased.

⁷ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Charismatic Gift of Prophecy: A Reformed Response to Wayne Grudem* (Memphis: Footstool, 1989), 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Further, as noted, the Bible teaches that the historical period where special revelation is taking place is also a period of special sign gifts (see Heb. 2:3-4; ac. 14:3; 2 Cor. 12:12; cf. Ex. 4:5; 1 Kgs. 17:24; Jn. 3:2; 9:30, 33; 10:25; Mt. 9:6; 14:33; 12:38-40; Ac. 2:22). If there are still genuine prophets among us, then where are the accompanying dramatic, publicly verifiable miracles? Obviously there are no genuine sign workers in the church today.

Thus far we have seen that most Charismatics have redefined prophecy as something less revelational and authoritative than what occurred in the days of the apostles. This unbiblical redefining of prophecy allows Charismatics to do two things. First, they avoid the objective verification that the biblical prophets were subject to by giving vague exhortations or nonspecific prophecies (which could easily be made up on the spot by any Christian; their nonspecific prophecies cannot be proven either true or false). Second, by asserting that prophecy is less revelational and authoritative than Scripture, they can claim that they are not adding to the Bible. We have noted that the office of New Testament prophet is a continuation of the Old Testament office. The exhortations and prophecies of the New Testament prophet are Spirit-inspired and equal in authority to Scripture. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that prophecy serves a distinct foundational function in the church because of unique historical circumstances (i.e., an open canon). When the New Testament canon was completed, prophecy ceased because it was no longer needed.

The description given thus far of the beliefs of Charismatics regarding prophecy does not convey the full truth regarding how bad things are within the Charismatic movement. It would be one thing if Charismatics had a few “prophets” in each church blurting out vague exhortations and nonspecific prophecies. But, in actuality, *most Charismatics believe that God speaks to each Spirit-filled Christian directly*; that He leads people to do things apart from the Holy Scriptures. Phrases common in Charismatic circles are “God told me to do this,” “The Spirit led me to do that,” “Jesus spoke to me and told me such and such.” Such thinking leads to subjectivism and mysticism; it clearly contradicts God’s word. In the days of the apostles, when all the supernatural gifts were being practiced, direct revelation came only by the apostles and prophets (tongues and their interpretation are a form of revelation also). The apostle Paul specifically says that not all had the gift of tongues and that only some were prophets (cf. 1 Cor. 12:30; Eph. 4:11). The idea, common in our day, that God leads people directly or communicates with people directly is unbiblical and dangerous. While the majority of Charismatics believe in biblical inerrancy and claim to love the Bible, many are being led about by subjective feelings, impressions and experiences rather than the clear teaching of God’s word.

Our responsibility as believers is not to follow our feelings or impressions but to study the word of God and apply it to our lives. Everything we need in life for all our decisions can be learned from scriptural principles. Christians must stop believing in mystical impressions and start learning how to deduce truths from Scripture, applying them to ourselves, our families, jobs, schools, civil government, and so on. The Charismatic movement and its implicit subjectivism have caused untold harm to thousands of Christians.