

**A Response to O. Palmer Robertson, *The Final Word* (Edinburgh, Scotland and Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 1993)**

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**Introductory comments**

At the outset I want to express my gratitude and appreciation to Dr. O. Palmer Robertson for his valuable teaching and for his friendship while I was a student at Westminster Seminary from 1971-1973. Dr. Robertson was my professor in more than one Old Testament class, and his remarkable ability to trace themes in the history of redemption from their beginning in the Old Testament to their fulfillment in the New Testament was a great encouragement to me, as was his evident love for the Lord Jesus Christ who was predicted in the Old Testament and proclaimed so clearly in the New Testament.

Although we have seen each other only occasionally since then, he has been most gracious in all of his personal interaction with me since those seminary days, and I continue to find that conversations with him are always interesting and stimulating to my thought. In fact, it may have been somewhat out of a sense of respect and appreciation for his friendship that I did not respond to the arguments in his book, *The Final Word: A Biblical Response for the Case for Tongues and Prophecy Today*, when it was first published in 1993 (although I am sure that the time burden of other commitments also was an important factor). Therefore it is with some hesitation that I write this analysis of his argument in *The Final Word*. But people have continued to ask me from time to time if I had responded to his argument, or if I was planning to do so, and so at last I have written these comments.

The entire fourth chapter of Dr. Robertson's book (pages 85-126) contains a detailed and thoughtful argument disagreeing with my book, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Eastbourne, England: Kingsway, and Westchester, Illinois, Crossway, 1988), which I will refer to in this article with the abbreviation GiftNTT. However, my book has also been issued in a revised edition, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today: Revised Edition* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2000; I will refer to this 2000 edition with the abbreviation GiftNTT 2000.). The body of the book is essentially the same in the revised edition but I added some appendices and moved one long section to a separate appendix, resulting in different pagination throughout.

Before I interact with Dr. Robertson's specific arguments, I have one comment of a more general kind. As I returned to this topic of the gift of prophecy in the last few days, after having done no work on it for the past five years, what struck me most strongly was *the absence of any clear biblical evidence to prove the heart of Dr. Robertson's "cessationist" position*. What I mean by that is that *I do not think there is any passage of Scripture, or any combination of passages, that should lead us to think that God does not communicate directly with his people throughout all of history in individual, personal ways that occur in addition to his communication in and through the written words of Scripture*.

If we look at the whole scope of biblical history we see that from beginning to end God had a personal relationship with his people, a relationship in which he communicated directly and personally with them, and this communication was never limited to the words that he gave to all of his people in “the book of the covenant” or the writings of the canon of Scripture. God had a personal relationship, and direct personal communication, with Adam and Eve, with Cain and Abel, with Enoch (who walked with God, Gen. 5:24), with Noah, with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, with Moses and David and Solomon, and with many other Old Testament prophets and kings. In the person of Jesus, God the Son communicated individually and personally with many people while he was on earth. And then the New Testament promises a personal relationship that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will have with each individual believer:

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (John. 14:23).

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him, and he with me (Rev. 3:20).

Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, *God will reveal that also to you* (Phil. 3:15).

that I may *know him* and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Phil. 3:20)

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him (Eph. 1:17).

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Rom 8:14: the present indicative verb *agontai* indicates that this “leading” is an ongoing process).

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh....  
But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law (Gal. 5:16, 18; again, in this case the verb *agesthe* is a present indicative verb, indicating ongoing activity).

My point is that from beginning to end the Bible tells us of a God who relates individually and personally to his people. And now Dr. Robertson comes and tells us, contrary to the experience of all of God’s people throughout all of the books of the Bible, that God no longer communicates personally and individually with any of his people except through the written words in the canon of Scripture.

So Dr. Robertson is asking us to believe (1) that throughout the Bible God communicated to his people both through written Scripture (as much as they had at any point) and through additional direct personal interaction with people, and (2) that God now communicates *only* through the written words of the canon, and no longer with direct personal fellowship and interaction with people. This is quite strange in light of the fact that Dr. Robertson himself argues that the New Covenant is seen to be better in every way (see *The Final Word*, 96-97, 122). But how can it be

better if we have lost that element of personal relationship with God and personal communication from God in addition to the words of the canon, that characterized all periods of history that the Bible talks about. Where is *anything* in the Bible that would lead us to believe that?

I realize, of course, that Dr. Robertson argues extensively that *the canon of Scripture is closed*. I agree strongly with that conclusion and in fact I included in my own book a lengthy appendix on the canon of Scripture giving very similar arguments why I believe it is closed (GiftNTT, 277-297 = GiftNTT 2000, 237-255). So Dr. Robertson and I agree that the canon is closed and no more writings are to be added to the Bible.

But that is not the question. The question is, what about communication from God to specific individuals that is not part of the canon? If the Bible is the “book of the covenant” that stipulates the terms of the relationship between God as king and us as his covenant people, then are we to say that *the king can never communicate with his people in any additional ways besides the covenant document*? Can he who created speech and loves his people never speak to them directly and personally? Dr. Robertson’s position, if I understand it correctly, allows for no element of individual, personal guidance from the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian, ever. Our guidance is simply to be taken from reading the Bible and using mature wisdom to apply it our lives. Robertson simply wants God’s people to “pay much closer attention to the private reading and public preaching of the Word of God. As they listen more attentively to that word, proclaimed authoritatively by ministers gifted by God and filled with the Spirit, they will mature in the faith, receive guidance for their lives, and be enabled to serve others in the Spirit of Christ” (p. 133). Dr. Robertson calls this “responsible adulthood among the saints of God” (p. 133).

I know that there is a small minority among Christians today who hold that God does not and will not guide us through the work of the Holy Spirit prompting us and leading us to choose one thing instead of another in our daily lives, not even occasionally. But surely the vast majority of Christians throughout all history have known and experienced the guidance of the Holy Spirit in making decisions, especially while they are praying and reading the words of Scripture, and they have known that this guidance includes not only the directions and commands and principles of Scripture, but also subjective impressions of God’s will and also additional thoughts or specific memories that the Lord brings to mind. And so my first observation on reading Dr. Robertson’s argument in the last few days was to note how a position that rules out all direct personal guidance from the Holy Spirit today is so completely different from the whole course of biblical history, and from the New Testament teaching on personal fellowship that we have with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And I reflected how I do not think there is any clear passage of Scripture that would support such a position. Perhaps I have missed something, but I do not think the passages that imply the expectation of a closed canon provide such support, nor do the passages that speak of the sufficiency of Scripture for the purposes for which it was intended. In fact, don’t think there are any strong passages of Scripture that would support this kind of strict cessationist view. And I was surprised to realize how weak the Scriptural support for such a view actually seemed to me.

Now in the rest of this article I would like to consider several specific arguments in Dr. Robertson’s book.

## **1. The argument that New Testament prophecy must be the same as Old Testament prophecy**

Dr. Robertson argues again and again that the gift of “prophecy” in the New Testament must be the same as the functioning of prophecy in the Old Testament, where prophets proclaimed the very words of God (see pp. 11, 88, 105, 106, 121, 122, and elsewhere throughout the book). In fact, this is one of the major arguments of his book. Since prophets in the Old Testament proclaimed the very words of God with absolute divine authority, then, Dr. Robertson argues, “prophets” in the New Testament have to do the same thing. They have to proclaim the very words of God. Therefore prophecy cannot be (as I had argued) something in which a prophet reports *in merely human words* something that God has brought to his mind.

Since this is such a foundational claim in Dr. Robertson’s position, it is surprising to me that that he does not treat at least three major differences between Old Testament and New Testament prophecy.

### **a. The authors of Scripture are no longer called “prophets” but “apostles”**

One major difference that Dr. Robertson does not address is the fact that the title used to apply to those who write and authorize Scripture in the New Covenant is not “prophet” but “apostle.” Paul does not begin his epistles, “Paul, a *prophet* of Christ Jesus” but rather “Paul, an *apostle* of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (Eph. 1:1; similar introductions are found elsewhere in his epistles; see also, “Peter, an *apostle* of Jesus Christ” in 1 Peter 1:1). If the office of “prophet” in the New Testament is exactly the same as “prophet” in the Old Testament then why did these authors of Scripture not call themselves “prophets”? Dr. Robertson fails to address this question. The best explanation is that the office of “prophet” has changed significantly in the New Covenant and a “prophet” in New Testament churches is not assumed to be someone who speaks the very words of God.

### **b. The widespread distribution of the gift of prophecy**

Another difference between Old Testament and New Testament prophecy that Dr. Robertson does not address is the amazingly widespread distribution of the gift of prophecy to thousands upon thousands of God’s people. In the Old Testament, at any one time there were very few established prophets among the people of God, often just one or two at a time. There was Moses, and there was Samuel, and there was Nathan the prophet, and at other times there were Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, but at any given time there were very few and often only one established prophet speaking the words of God to the people. (The “bands of prophets” associated with Elijah and Elisha in 2 Kgs. 2:3-15 probably had a different function, as I argue elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that the Old Testament canon does not preserve any “words of the Lord” from those groups of prophets prophesying all at once.)

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<sup>1</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1982), pages 33-37; I also include in this discussion the seventy elders of Moses who prophecy all at once in Numbers 11:24-30: we have no record of any “words of the Lord” that they spoke to give binding moral law for all of God’s people.

But now in the New Covenant the gift of prophecy is given to thousands upon thousands of God's people, such that this gift was functioning in every church where there were believers to whom the Holy Spirit had given spiritual gifts. Prophecy is found in the churches in Jerusalem (Act. 18:27), Antioch (Act. 11:27; 13:1), Ephesus (Act. 19:6; Eph. 4:11), Caesarea (Act. 21:9-11), Rome (Rom. 12:6), Corinth (1Cor. 12-14), and Thessalonica (1Thes. 5:20). Therefore it is safe to assume that the gift of prophecy was functioning in *every* New Testament church, and there were many hundreds of churches throughout the Mediterranean world in the first century, with probably many thousands of Christians with the gift of prophecy.

This is certainly a different situation from the Old Testament. Were thousands of "prophets" actually speaking the very words of God? Were God's people to be expected to go around to the many hundreds or even thousands of churches in the first century world and collect the prophecies given week after week, and write them down, and produce hundreds of volumes of "words of the Lord" which they were to obey as they obeyed Scripture? In fact, we have no record of anything like this happening, nor do we have any record anywhere in the New Testament of churches recording or preserving these prophecies as if they were "words of the Lord." Rather *they preserve and obey the writings and teachings of the apostles*, not of the prophets. (The Book of Revelation is a prophecy conveyed through the Apostle John, but this just shows that apostles sometimes functioned in a "prophetic" role as deliverers of special revelation from God. Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5 also speak of this.)

This means that Acts 2 is a very significant passage to indicate a difference between Old Testament and New Testament prophecy. Peter quotes the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, on the day of Pentecost:

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and on my female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy (Act. 2:17-18).

Peter thus indicates that in the New Testament there will be an incredibly wide distribution of this gift to all sorts of God's people: young and old, men and women, all shall prophesy. This makes most sense if the gift of prophecy has become something different in the New Covenant, a gift through which God indeed reveals things to his people, but these things are the *reported* and communicated by the prophets in words that are merely human words, not having the absolute divine authority that belongs to the words of the Bible.

The widespread distribution of the gift of prophecy is a strong argument that "prophecies" in the New Testament church were not thought of as the very words of God to his people, but were thought of as something with lesser authority, something that had to be tested and evaluated and judged, something in which there could be mistakes and people had to sort the good from the bad, as Paul commands in 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21.

This widespread distribution of the gift of prophecy therefore fits my proposal about the nature of this gift and is a significant difference between the Old Covenant and New Covenant. But Dr. Robertson does not discuss it.

### **c. The parallel change in the office of priest**

A third difference concerns the parallel change in the nature of the office of “priest.” In the Old Testament the priests were only taken from the Tribe of Levi, and only a very few in each generation were selected to minister in the Temple of God. The priesthood was a limited, restricted office, and those who were priests had a special privilege of access into the presence of God in the Temple that was not allowed for others in Israel.

But in the New Covenant *we have all become priests*: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood” (1Pe. 1:9). We all have confidence to enter the very holy of holies because we have obtained the rights that were restricted to the priests in the Old Testament (see Heb. 10:19-22; 12:22-24). The Apostle John wrote, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, *priests* to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever” (Rev. 1:5-6; see also Rev. 5:10).

Now if I were to make an argument similar to the one Dr. Robertson makes about the office of “prophet,” I would say, “The office of *priest* in the New Testament has to be *exactly the same* as the office of *priest* in the Old Testament! Therefore only a very few people can be priests, and they must descend only from one family. They need to offer sacrifices in a temple just as the priests did in the Old Testament.”

Of course, such an argument would be foolish, for we see that in the New Testament just as the office of “priest” has expanded to all of God’s people, so now the functions of the office of “priest” have changed significantly. *We are all priests now*, but we don’t any longer serve in an earthly temple or offer earthly sacrifices, for we all have direct access to God in prayer through the way that has been opened to us by our great High Priest, Jesus Christ.

Just as the office of “priest” has changed significantly from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, so there is significant evidence that the office of “prophet” has also changed significantly. Thousands of God’s people are now “prophets” but they no longer speak the very words of God to be added to the Bible. Rather, they report things that have been shown to them or revealed to them by God, yet their words have merely human authority, not the absolute divine authority of the very words of God. Their prophecies do not belong to Scripture. They have to be tested and evaluated (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:20-21).

But Dr. Robertson does not even consider the parallel with the change in the office of priest and its significance for a change in the office of prophet as well. (To be fair to Dr. Robertson, I did not include this argument about a parallel change in the priesthood in GiftNTT or GiftNTT 2000. But it is still surprising to me that he argues so strongly that the office of prophet *must* be the same as the office of prophet in the Old Testament, without considering the parallel change in another major office in the Old Testament, the office of priest.)

Therefore, before we even come to considering specific verses that talk about the gift of prophecy, it is significant that Dr. Robertson fails to consider three major reasons why we would expect that the gift of prophecy in the New Testament is different from the gift of prophecy in the Old Testament: (1) that it is apostles, not prophets, who write Scripture in the New Testament; (2) that the gift of prophecy has been widely distributed among many thousands of God's people, in contrast to the Old Testament; and (3) that the parallel with the change in the office of priest suggests that there would be a similar change in the office of prophet as well.

## **2. The argument from bad motives.**

The opening pages of Dr. Robertson's chapter in which he interacts with my book (chapter 4: "Current Advocacy of the Continuation of Revelation"), connect my view with many people who have wrongful motives in seeking current revelation from God. His first sentence is, "Throughout the history of the church some people have looked for the continuation of special revelation from God to provide direction for their lives" (p. 85). He then goes on to mention "Romanists" (a pejorative term for Roman Catholics), "mystics," people who have "great difficulty being content with an objectively recorded word from the Lord," and a person who "wants to avoid the personal responsibility of determining to sell his house and relocate his family." Then Dr. Robertson says, "The search goes on for a new way for God to continue to revealing his will in ways other than through Holy Scripture. Each new generation offers a slightly different twist on the recurring theme. The current drift in this direction has been formulated well in a work by Wayne Grudem entitled *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*" (pp. 85-86).

In response, I could simply say that my motive for advocating a gift of prophecy in which people report what God has revealed to them, but without the authority of God's very words, is not a motive to support Roman Catholics or mystics, or to avoid personal responsibility, or to encourage people who are getting divorced for reasons contrary to Scripture. My motive is simply to be faithful to the teaching of Scripture as I understand it.

## **3. The argument from church history.**

Dr. Robertson has a brief allusion to the leaders of the Reformation. He says,

The Reformers who paid with their life-blood for freedom from dominance by the traditions of the church were especially jealous in guarding future generations from the oppressions created by supposed words from the Lord. 'Scripture alone' was their uncompromising cry. Only the written Word of God, an objective standard which all men can see and read, communicates infallible truth to God's people, since God has now stopped using his former methods in revealing his will to the church (Heb. 1:1). But the search goes on for a new way for God to continue revealing his will in ways other than through Holy Scripture... (p. 86).

In response, I can simply say that I firmly agree with the Reformation principle of "Scripture alone." In fact, I have written an entire chapter defending the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture (see my *Systematic Theology* [Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, and Grand

Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], pp. 127-138). I firmly believe that the Bible alone is our only source of absolutely true and authoritative words of God. We are not to build doctrine or ethical standards for God's people on any other foundation than the Bible alone.

But this argument says nothing about whether God will continue to guide and direct and lead us in personal ways, both through the subjective leading of the Holy Spirit, and through the gift of prophecy that reports in merely human words something that God has brought to mind. In fact, in the revised edition of my book, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, I give evidence from several significant Reformed leaders who held a very similar view of the gift of prophecy to the view I have advocated. These include the Scottish reformer John Knox (about 1514-1572) and a number of other leaders of the Scottish Reformation, the authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-1646), Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661), George Gillespie (1613-1648), William Bridge (1600-1670), Richard Baxter, the famous Puritan pastor and writer (1615-1691), and Charles Spurgeon, the famous Reformed Baptist pastor in London (1834-1892) (these quotations are found in GiftNTT 2000, 347-359).

My conclusion is that many of God's people throughout history have held *both* to the doctrine of "Scripture alone" and to the fact that God continues to reveal his will and reveal facts about present-day situations in subjective ways, even through a gift of prophecy that functions to the present day.

#### **4. The argument from practical difficulties.**

Dr. Robertson frequently argues that if someone gives a current prophecy saying that the Lord is directing a person in one way or another, but if these prophecies could contain errors or be wrong, it will lead to ambiguity and uncertainty. In fact, one section struck me as so humorous, and so well written, that it is worth quoting here in full:

...let it be supposed that a prophet delivers a word to the congregation based on a revelation he has just received. He reports as a prophetic utterance, as has been hypothetically proposed: 'You should marry Philip' (p. 167 [this is a reference to my book GiftNTT]).<sup>2</sup>

Is it to be supposed that the prophet has somehow become confused and the person addressed should marry David instead of Philip? Or has the prophet addressed his word to one person when actually it should have been directed to her sister? Or was it that the person addressed was to go out to dinner with Philip (or was it David?) rather than marry her (or him)? What is the point of it all if the prophet is going to get the message so confused that a person cannot tell what to do? Why would God bother to give a revelation and then design a manner of communication of his message that is so confused that no one can really tell what he did or did not say, not even the prophet himself? (pp. 91-92).

Dr. Robertson raises similar objections at many other points in the book (see pp. 89-94, 120-123, for example).

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<sup>2</sup> The reference is to GiftNTT, p. 167, which is p. 141 in GiftNTT 2000.



The general question here is whether God ever works to guide us through methods in which we are not sure whether something is guidance from God or not. I would reply that of course God does this in ways that most Christians, perhaps even including Dr. Robertson, readily accept.

For example, *does God ever work through changed circumstances and events* to show us what he wants us to do? I suspect that Dr. Robertson, with his strong confidence in the sovereignty of God, might agree (though I have not asked him) that God can work through unusual or remarkable circumstances (or “unusual providences”) to direct and guide us in the way we should go. But many times it takes a combination of two or three or four unusual circumstances before we have increasing confidence that God is leading us through them in a certain direction or another.

And then there is the matter of advice from godly friends. In fact, just a few months ago I was on the telephone with a woman whom Margaret and I have known for many years. In the course of the conversation I said to her something like, “I think you should marry Philip” (although that was not his actual name). I intended this not as a prophecy but as a word of thoughtful advice, and I think she took it not as a command from the Lord but as a word of thoughtful advice from a mature, well-meaning Christian friend who had known her for many years. Did she immediately decide to marry the man? No. Did she completely disregard my words? No. I believe that she received the words as a bit of helpful advice that *may be* one of the ways in which God was helping her decide what to do in her relationship with this man. She did not disregard it. Nor did she immediately obey it as a certain “word from the Lord.” She simply received it as one factor among many that go into the complex process of attempting to decide a course of action that would be pleasing to the Lord regarding her life. This is an ordinary, everyday activity for all Christians and it is not impossible to put into practice.

So my question is this: Does God sometimes use providentially guided circumstances and advice from friends to help to guide us in daily life? Yes, at least from my viewpoint. Does this make the Christian life impossibly confusing? Not really.

Can we therefore find value, not confusion, in a gift of prophecy in which people tell us what they think God has revealed to them, but without certainty that this is what God has revealed? Yes, certainly. I have personally seen this gift function very effectively many times without producing confusion among God’s people. It rather functions as an additional, often very helpful way in which God reveals the truth about a particular situation to his people.

In fact, in the very page from which Dr. Robertson lifts the quotation, “You should marry Philip,” I explain more fully how this happens. Here is the quotation given more fully:

In practical terms this means that if a prophecy contains words of ethical instruction (“You shouldn’t go to London,” or “You should leave your job and devote all of your time to preaching,” or “You should marry Philip”), these instructions should not be considered divine obligations...but they should be viewed as the prophet’s fairly accurate (but not infallible) report of something he thinks (though not with absolute certainty) has been revealed to him by God. The

person or person or persons to whom the prophecy was directed should respond in much the same way they would respond to preaching or personal advice.... The hearer(s) should evaluate (cf. 1Cor. 14:29) the prophecy, the sermon, or the advice for conformity to Scripture, to received teaching, and to facts that they know to be true (GiftNTT, 167-168 = GiftNTT 2000, 141-142).

I should add one more personal comment. In my own life, I have had many people come to me telling me that “the Lord has said” something to them about what I should do or should not do. (Try writing a book on the gift of prophecy and you will quickly discover how many people feel free to write you letters with this kind of thing!) In many cases they come from people whom I do not know, and the supposed “word from the Lord” shows no knowledge of who I am, my personal situation, or my deep-seated understanding of what God wants me to do with my life. In such cases I feel completely free to disregard these messages immediately. The writer was just wrong. If God wants to make something known to me, he will do so in ways that are much more evidently from him.

But at other times a pastor whom I respect, or a close friend whom I have known for years, or a fellow elder in my church, or my wonderful wife Margaret, have come to me saying that they think the Lord has shown them something that they should share with me regarding my life. In these cases, when such words come from mature Christians whom I know well, I pay more careful attention. On a number of occasions God has spoken through these words to encourage me in a direction in which I was headed but with some uncertainty, or to encourage me when I was getting discouraged about some ministry activity, or to make me to reconsider some ordering of priorities in my life, or even to prompt me to make a phone call or contact an old friend, and that call has resulted in significant blessing and fruitfulness for ministry. In some cases these words have led to repentance from sin of which I had been unaware, or which I had forgotten about. These have been valuable experiences, and I believe that God has used them significantly.

So I would say in response to Dr. Robertson, it seems to me that the hypothetical, artificial situations, even humorous ones, that you have invented in your book are very unlike the actual reality of the gift of prophecy as I have seen it functioning in my own life and the lives of other Christians whom I know and love. In actual practice, the difficulties that you imagine are greatly exaggerated. In a mature church where there is sound teaching of the Word and where people are taught not to take prophecies as a “word from the Lord,” but as something that a person thinks God may have revealed, then it is not that difficult to process these things in a wise and mature way. It is very similar to the way we would process advice from a godly, mature friend who thinks that he or she has understood something of God’s will for us and comes with a word of counsel.

One other matter should probably be addressed at this point as well. Dr. Robertson expresses doubt that God could bring to our minds words that he did not want us to understand as his own words. Dr. Robertson says the following about my position:

But to take the confusion one step further, God might even ‘cause words to come to mind which he does not want us to take as his own words’ (p.121). Perhaps this last assertion

should be repeated so that its full significance may be grasped. According to this new view of prophecy, God might even “*cause words to come to mind which he does not want us to take as His own words*” (p.121, italics added). How could anything be further from the Biblical concept of prophecy? What could contradict more radically the nature of the God of all truth? Would he have a prophet serve as his spokesman and yet cause words to come to mind that he himself does not want the people to consider as his words? No, God is not the author of such confusion (Robertson, *The Final Word*, p. 91).

When I went back to look at this sentence in the first edition of my book, I realized that I had not explained very clearly what I meant. But then I realized that I had actually added a sentence of explanation in the second edition of the book:

In fact God can cause words to come to mind that he does not want us to take as his own words. *For example, he may bring to mind words that we would remember or imagine another person saying to us* (GIFTNTT 2000, p. 100).

If God brought to mind words that a friend had said to us several years before, and that we had completely forgotten, then of course he would want us to take those as words that our friend had spoken to us, not words that he himself was saying to us.

## **5. The argument that the New Covenant is better.**

Dr. Robertson argues,

If the New Covenant in every way is ‘better’ than the old, it rightly could be expected that every part of the New Covenant would be better than its Old Covenant counterpart...it would seem strange indeed if New Covenant prophecy took on a form that was significantly weaker in manifesting divine perfections than its Old Covenant counterpart. Obviously the content of New Covenant prophecy is far more glorious than Old Covenant prophecy. But is it to be expected that this more glorious reality is to be communicated through a fallible, unreliable form of prophecy in direct contrast with the unbroken perfection of 1,500 years of Old Covenant prophecy? (pp. 96-97; see also p. 122).

My response to this is that Dr. Robertson is here comparing apples and oranges rather than comparing similar things to similar things. Surely the New Covenant is better than the Old Covenant, specifically with respect to written Scripture and the existence of direct personal fellowship with God that included some communication in addition to canonical Scripture.

The actual situation is as follows: The Old Covenant had written Scripture and some measure of personal fellowship between God and individual people. The New Covenant has *more* written Scripture (the canon is complete) and much *more* personal fellowship between God and individual believers (see John 14:23; Philippians 3:10; Revelation 3:20). Certainly, the New Covenant is better in many ways. The Messiah has come, and this is better. The canon is complete, and this is better. And prophecy has been widely distributed among all of God’s

people (Acts 2:17-18), as are all the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7), and this is better.

So the comparison should not be between Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament gift of prophecy. The comparison should be between the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament Scriptures, which are far better and more complete. And the comparison should be between the Old Testament limited distribution of the gift of prophecy and the New Testament widespread distribution of the gift of prophecy, which is far more widespread, and this is better. As far as the authoritative writings that consist of God's very words, the comparison should be between the Old Testament prophets, who wrote the words of the Old Testament, and the New Testament apostles, who wrote and authorized the words of the New Testament. Their message is also far better because it tells that the Messiah has come.

## **6. The Argument from Specific Verses in 1 Corinthians**

In my book, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, I argued that several verses dealing with prophecy in the New Testament indicated that it had a lesser kind of authority, that it should not be understood as God's very words, but rather should be understood as a merely human record of something that God had spontaneously brought to mind. Dr. Robertson interacts with a number of passages that I used to support this conclusion, and I will consider his objections on each verse in the following sections.

### **a. 1 Corinthians 14:29**

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:29,

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said (ESV).

I argue that the verb translated "weigh" (*diakrino*) indicates a kind of sorting and sifting, a making of fine distinctions among related things, and that this is best understood to imply that the congregation listens and evaluates the prophecies, sorting out what is good from what is not. This implies that the words of a prophet are not to be taken as the words of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, the Old Testament prophets, in which every word was a word of God that had to be obeyed. Rather, the sorting and sifting implies that this kind of prophecy consists of fallible human words that report something the prophet believes God has suddenly brought to mind. And the congregation is to evaluate whether this is so or not.

Dr. Robertson objects that my position "builds on inferential wording that actually is not even found in the word of God. The words '(weigh) what is said' are not to be found in the original text of Scripture, but have been added by translators as their interpretation of the passage. Not a single ancient manuscript of the New Testament contains these words....The arguing favoring a different kind of New Covenant prophecy rests heavily on an appeal to words that do not even exist in

the New Testament!” (pp. 98-99).

He repeats this argument later: “as we have already seen, the words ‘weigh carefully what is said’ do not even appear in the text of Scripture and involve an unnecessary inference” (p. 100). And again he says, “already it has been indicated that the phrase ‘(weigh) what is said’ does not appear in the original text of Scripture” (p. 101).

In response, I agree that there is no wording in the Greek text for the phrase “what is said.” The Greek text for the second half of the verse simply says (literally), “let the others evaluate (or weigh, or differentiate, or separate, or judge).” Probably Paul thought it unnecessary, after telling the Corinthians to let some prophets *speak* and others *evaluate*, to add that they were to evaluate *what the prophets said*. It was clear from the context. They surely were not supposed to evaluate the weather, or the clothing that the prophets wore!

But it does seem to me that Dr. Robertson has discussed this in a misleading way. It would have been completely accurate, and not misleading, if he had written, “the words ‘what is said’ do not even appear in the text of Scripture.” But he did not say that. He also included the verb. He wrote, “the words, ‘weigh carefully what is said’ do not even appear in the text of Scripture” (p. 100; see other quotes on p. 98, 101 which I recorded above). But the Greek verb *diakrino* is appropriately translated “weigh” or “weigh carefully” and it is misleading to imply to the reader that this word does not appear in the Greek text either. Dr. Robertson nowhere makes that clarification, and so English readers without access to the Greek text are led to think that my entire argument about evaluating the prophecies carefully is based on something that is not in the Greek text.

The words “what is said” seem so evident from the sense of the context that at least seven modern translations have used some expression such as “weigh what is said” to render the force of the verb *diakrino* in the context of *how people should respond to a spoken message*. In fact, the idea that the words the prophets speak are what people should listen to and evaluate is, I think, required by this context. Notice the following translations:

“Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said” (RSV, NRSV, ESV).

“...the others should weigh carefully what is said” (NIV, TNIV).

“...let the others evaluate what is said” (NLT, NET).

Three other translations do not include the words “what is said” but the sense is surely implied:

“Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment” (NASB).

“...and let the others judge” (NKJV; KJV is similar).

In using any of these translations, the reader will understand that what people are doing is evaluating, judging, or weighing the words that have just been spoken by the prophets.

Even Dr. Robertson's own position, in which he argues that "the 'discrimination' appears to involve a determination about who will speak, and in what order" (p. 100), the people first have to hear what the prophets have said before they can make any discrimination, and their decision has to be based on what the prophets have said.

So it does not seem to me that there is much force in Dr. Robertson's argument that these words "are not to be found in the original text of Scripture" (p. 98). It still can be argued whether the listeners evaluate the words *in order to decide who will speak first*, (Dr. Robertson's position), or whether they evaluate the words *in order to decide which ones are from the Lord and which ones aren't* (my position). But in every case the hearers have to evaluate the words. That is the clear force of the passage.

And while my sense of the passage ("let the others weigh what is said") is supported by at least seven modern translations (see above), Dr. Robertson's translation, "let the others discriminate," is supported by no English translation that I was able to find. And I think it is significant that he mentions no commentator on 1 Corinthians who supports his idea that "let the others discriminate" involves "a determination about who will speak, and in what order" (p. 100). I know of no commentator on 1 Corinthians who imagines that that is what Paul has in mind, nor does he quote any in support. Dr. Robertson's in fact gives no supporting arguments and no supporting commentators for his unusual view.

We might well ask who is actually adding to the sense of Scripture here. Dr. Robertson's argument that 1 Corinthians 14:29 means that "the others should *decide who speaks and in what order*" is an idea that is supported by no word of Scripture! Nothing in this text says anything about deciding who speaks, or in what order people should speak. It simply says prophets should speak and the others should evaluate or discern. It is much more natural to the sense of the text to think that they are evaluating the words that the prophets have spoken.

Dr. Robertson also says that the verb *diakrino* is often used of discrimination "among people, not words or ideas" (p. 99). He gives other examples of the word used in this way. But here he mistakes the *meaning of a word* from the different *contexts in which it is used*. Sometimes the verb *diakrino* is used of making distinctions between person (Acts 15:9), and other times it is used making distinctions among words (see, for example, Job 12:11 in the Septuagint, which uses this verb in the question, "does not the ear test words?").

I think Dr. Robertson has missed the point of my larger argument, which is that the word *diakrino* carries the sense of making fine distinctions among related things or ideas, and thus it is different from the simple word *krino*, which means simply, "to

judge.” For example, *diakrino* is used of interpreting the appearance of the sky in Matthew 16:3 (“you know how to *interpret* the appearance of the sky”). It is used of making fine distinctions to settle disputes among members of the church in 1 Corinthians 6:5 (a situation which often involves assigning partial guilt to each party and partial rightness to each party, a making of fine distinctions). It is used in 1 Corinthians 11:1 of discerning our own actions and conduct.

My conclusion is that Paul’s use of the verb *diakrino* indicates a process in which people will weigh and sift and evaluate the words the prophets speak, sorting out what seems to be genuinely from the Lord from other things that do not. This process is far different from the situation of judging false prophets who might come to the church from outside, because in that case they would bring false doctrine by which their identity would be known (see 1 John 4:1-3). Rather, Paul envisages a situation in which various genuine Christians, all with the gift of prophecy, speak words that are evaluated by the congregation. This fits well with the meaning of *diakrino*. But the idea of deciding who speaks, and what order, is unrelated to the sense of *diakrino* and is an idea that Dr. Robertson has simply imported into the text.

#### **b. 1 Corinthians 14:30**

Paul writes, in the context of people of giving prophecy,

If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged (1 Cor. 14:30-31).

My argument here is that Paul seems unconcerned that the remainder of the prophecy of the first speaker would be lost. That is consistent with the idea that these were not actual words of God, but were the prophets own human report of what they thought God had brought to mind.

Dr. Robertson’s response is to say that the first prophet, who had to be silent when someone else spoke, could speak later. He writes, “Does Paul anywhere suggest that the prophet who had been interrupted could not later arise to complete his prophetic deliverance? (p. 102).

My response to this is to say that my position has a basis in *what the text actually says*. Paul says the first speaker should be silent. That is what we know. Dr. Robertson adds that this prophet could speak later. But this seems to me to be a supposition unsupported by any words in the text. *We know* that the prophet is to be silent, but Dr. Robertson then says he is to speak later. That *we do not know*. It a “supposition” with no evidence in the text to support it, somewhat similar to his supposition that 1 Cor. 14:29 has to do with determining who will speak and in what order. It begins to appear that Dr. Robertson’s position, not the one I have argued, is the position that is built on what he calls a “string of suppositions” (p. 103). Or at least that is how it seems to me.

c. **1 Corinthians 14:36**

After about talking about prophets speaking and people passing judgment on prophecies, Paul adds,

Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? (1 Cor. 14:36, ESV)

My argument regarding this verse was that Paul's rhetorical question, "Or was it from you that the word of God came?" clearly implies that the "word of God" did *not* come forth from the Corinthians. They were unable to speak the word of God, even though the gift of prophecy was clearly functioning in their church.

That is why Paul reminds them that they have to be subject to his authority as an apostle. He tells them in the next verse, "... the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord" (1 Cor 14:36). Paul wrote commands of the Lord but the Corinthians had never given a word of God – the word of God had not come from them. But that means that the gift at prophecy at Corinth was something *other* than speaking the "words of God" during the worship service. This implies that it had lesser authority, that it was speaking with merely human authority reporting something that the prophet had brought to mind.

Dr. Robertson differs with this when he writes,

Does Paul actually state that the prophets of Corinth did not deliver the word of God? Is he not instead denying that the word of God had its origin among them, as represented in several current translations? (p.103).

I agree that several translations render this, "Did the word of God originate with you?" (NIV; similarly, RSV, NRSV, TNIV). Other translations use italics to show that the idea of the word originating with the Corinthians is not literally part of the Greek text but is a possible interpretation: the NASB says, "Was it from you that the word of *God first* went forth?" And the NKJV says, "Or did the Word of God come *originally* from you?" In both cases the italicized word is the way that these translations indicate an interpretative addition that they think gives the sense but is not actually required by the original Greek wording.

The Greek word is quite a common verb, *exerchomai*, which occurs 218 times in the New Testament and simply means, "to come out, to go out". There is no idea of *originally* coming out or *originating* in the word itself. I agree that it is possible grammatically to understand the verb that Paul uses as belonging to a certain grammatical category that emphasizes the beginning of an action (something that is technically called an inceptive aorist), but this sense of the aorist is not common and it is certainly not required unless it is clearly indicated by the context. In fact, it is somewhat surprising that Dr. Robertson, who makes so much of the fact that



the words “what has said” are not literally in the Greek text of 1 Cor 14:29, here fails to tell the reader that a very literal rendering of this verse does not include the idea of the Word of God *first* going out from Corinth.

In any case, the context does not really favor the idea of “originate” in this verse. Paul is arguing here that they should obey *his* instructions and that they can’t make their own rules for the way spiritual gifts should function (his topic in 1 Cor. 12-14). To prove this, it would not help very much to say, “Did the Word of God *originate* with you?” because that would simply be saying that Corinth was not Mount Sinai (where the Ten Commandments were given as the first written words from God) or that Corinth was not Jerusalem (the city from which the gospel of Jesus Christ was first proclaimed). That would not prove that they were unable to speak words of God, because Paul himself had not been sent out from Jerusalem: He had been converted on the road to Damascus, and had been sent out by the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3). So the Word of God had not “originated” with Paul either, yet he himself was able to claim in the very next verse that what he wrote was “a command of the Lord” (1 Cor 14:37).

Rather, what Paul is arguing here is that *no* words of God had ever come from the Corinthian church. Again, a very literal translation of the verse is simply, “or was it from you that the word of God came?” Paul is clearly implying that the word of God has never come forth from the church at Corinth. The King James version itself also translated this verse quite literally and bluntly: “What? came the word of God out from you?” The implication is that it did not. The prophets at Corinth were unable to speak the very words of God.

#### **d. 1 Corinthians 14:37**

Here Paul writes,

If anyone thinks he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing you are a command of the Lord (1 Cor 14:37, ESV).

My argument with respect to this verse was that Paul was pointing out that even the prophets at Corinth had to be subject to his apostolic words. He apparently did not treat them as equals or peers who were able to correct him with regard to giving the very words of God.

Dr. Robertson’s response here is to say that this verse does not prove that they could not *supplement* Paul’s writings:

To say that the prophets at Corinth could not contradict Paul is not quite the same thing as saying they could not supplement Paul. Obviously no Word from the Lord will contradict a previous word. (p. 104).

My initial response to Dr. Robertson's argument here was that his answer had merit. I agree that, in theory at least, it is certainly possible that Paul could be writing words of the Lord and could simply say to others that they should acknowledge his authority and not give any words from God that contradicted him. And if that position of Dr. Robinson's is accepted, then my argument from 1 Cor. 14:37 would not have the kind of persuasive force that the other verses had. I agree at least that this argument is not as strong as the argument from the other verses in this chapter.

But it still seems to me that Paul's attitude toward the church at Corinth is decidedly different from his attitude toward the apostles in Jerusalem, people who he knows are also speaking words of the Lord. He explains in Galatians that he went up to Jerusalem to set before the leaders of the Jerusalem Church "the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain" (Gal. 2:2). He seems to allow for the possibility that the apostles in Jerusalem could have corrected him at some point or other. But he does not allow this possibility with the Corinthian church.

However, in all honesty, I have to say that this argument from 1 Cor. 14:37 does not seem to be as strong as the others.

## **7. The Argument from specific verses in the rest of the New Testament**

### **a. Acts 2**

In Peter's sermon at Pentecost he proclaims,

For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and my female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy (Acts 2:15-18).

Dr. Robertson's argues here that prophecy here has to be exactly the same as Old Testament prophecy:

Peter equates new covenant prophecy with its old covenant equivalent. Miraculously the apostles have been given the power to prophesy in all the languages of the people assembled at Jerusalem. If, with this starting-point, the intent of the book of Acts is to develop a different kind of prophecy for New Covenant congregations, it might be expected that some sort of explicit indicator of a change in the nature of prophecy would be provided along the way. Yet no such indicator exists. (p. 106-107).

But is Dr. Robertson correct to say that there is no indicator of differences between prophecy in the New Testament and prophecy in the Old Testament? In fact there are

several differences indicated, none of which Dr. Robertson mentions or considers: (1) The very prophecy that Peter quotes from Joel predicts a tremendous difference in that the Holy Spirit in his work of empowering the gift of prophecy will now be poured out on “all flesh,” that is, on all of God’s people. This is a tremendous difference from the limited work of the Holy Spirit in empowering gifts among God’s people in the Old Testament, and it might cause us to think that there would be a difference in the nature of the gift as well. (2) The event that Peter says is the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy about “prophecy,” is actually the speaking in tongues that has just occurred and has astounded the assembled crowds. No recorded instance of an Old Testament prophet speaking a language he had never learned occurred in the entire Old Testament. Here at least is an indication that something is different! (3) Peter’s sermon proclaiming God’s interpretation and explanation of the event was given not by a “prophet” (as in the Old Testament), but by an “apostle,” namely, Peter. This itself is again a difference.

These differences will be worked out and explained more fully throughout the rest of Acts and the Epistles, but surely there are several differences, which should not be ignored.

#### **b. Acts 11:28**

This passage says,

Now in these day prophets came down to Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).

I was disappointed to see that Dr. Robertson does not even tell readers what I say about this passage, namely, that “the evidence in this passage is too slim to draw any certain conclusions” (p. 90).

Yet in examining this passage I also state that “Luke’s language is entirely compatible with a kind of New Testament prophecy similar to that in 1 Corinthians, prophecy which was based on a “revelation” but not reported in divinely authoritative words” (GiftNTT, 90). I argue this on the basis of the word translated “foretold” (Greek *semaino*). I also argue it on the basis of the Greek expression translated “by the Holy Spirit” which “would seem to suggest -- but only *suggest* -- some lesser kind of authority” (GiftNTT, 90)

It is also puzzling to see that when Dr. Robertson refers to my understanding of the word *semaino* he puts my statement that this word refers to a “vague indication of what is to happen” in quotation marks and says that it came from my page 90, but he fails to indicate that here I am not giving my own definition but am quoting the standard lexicon for New Testament Greek, the Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1979 edition), p. 747. He says that my analysis of *dia* plus genitive in the Greek expression “by the Holy Spirit” (or “through

the Holy Spirit”) “stretches the force of the Greek preposition beyond reasonable propriety” (p. 109), but this is an argument with no basis to it because he gives no evidence for his claim, and he gives no answer to the examples that I give on pages (89-90= GiftNTT2000, 71-72), in which the preposition *dia* takes exactly that force. Moreover, he fails to interact at all with the fact that I point out that this exact Greek expression is never used in the Septuagint to refer to prophetic speech that has absolute divine authority.

It still seems to me that these arguments have some value in indicating that the speech by Agabus might not have had the kind of absolute divine authority attached to the speech of Old Testament prophets.

### c. Acts 13:2

This verse says, “while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”

Dr. Robertson says, “No indicator is given, explicitly or implicitly, that a new kind of prophecy has now been introduced into the life of the church” (p. 109).

What Dr. Robertson fails to tell the reader is that I do not take this as an example of prophecy, and that it is not called “prophecy” in the context of Acts, and that I argue at some length that other similar reports of speech by the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts are different from the gift of prophecy as it functioned in the New Testament church. Dr. Robertson therefore is responding to an argument that I do not make, and he fails to consider the argument that I actually do make (see GiftNTT, 90-92=GiftNTT2000 72-74).

### d. Acts 19:5-7

After Paul explained the gospel to some men he met at Ephesus, we read,

On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about 12 men in all (Acts 19:5-7, ESV)

My argument at this point was: (1) “The prophesying here bears no resemblance to the messenger speeches in the Old Testament which were thought to possess absolute divine authority in the actual words spoken” (GiftNTT, 92-93=GiftNTT2000, 74). This was because a whole group of men was prophesying at once, and it is doubtful that the message of any one of them could be heard clearly. This is unlike the prophets who came individually as messengers of God in the Old Testament. (2) This is “also certainly different from the divinely authoritative speech of Paul and the other apostles” (GiftNTT, 93=GiftNTT2000, 74). (3) Even if the passage just means that these new Christians spoke in tongues and prophesied one at a time, it would not fill

the need for any additional “words of the Lord,” for Paul the apostle himself was with them. My conclusion was that the prophesying here at Ephesus by these 12 men does not seem to have been prophecy that gave the very words of God.

Dr. Robertson’s response is to say,

The statement that the prophesying at Ephesus “bears no resemblance to the messenger speeches in the Old Testament” (p. 92-93) is an assertion made without substantiation. The fact that a number of people prophesied hardly supports this assertion, particularly in the light of the experience of Pentecost (p. 110).

But making reference to Pentecost tells us nothing about the messenger speeches in the Old Testament. In fact, there are no examples in the Old Testament where a message from God came through 12 people all at once. In this case it seems to me that Dr. Robertson’s claim is “an assertion made without substantiation,” not my argument.

Once again, the gift of prophecy by these 12 men at Ephesus does not seem to be something that spoke the very words of God to his people.

#### **e. Acts 21:4**

At this point in Acts, Paul is on his way to Jerusalem. They come to Tyre, and we read,

And having sought out the disciples we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

My argument here is that, although this is not specifically called prophecy, it is speech that was given “through the Spirit,” and therefore probably is an example of New Testament prophecy. And in these prophecies the disciples were telling Paul “not to go on to Jerusalem,” but he went to Jerusalem anyway! In other words, Paul felt free to disobey some speech that was given “through the Spirit” in one of the New Testament churches.

Dr. Robertson, by way of response, refers to four commentators on Acts who all concluded that the Holy Spirit had revealed to these disciples “the sufferings Paul would undergo at Jerusalem” and then to this matter that the Holy Spirit had revealed, “the concerned disciples appended their own conclusion: that Paul should not proceed to Jerusalem” (p. 111; he refers to commentaries by Munck, Bruce, Alexander, and Calvin). It is interesting that this is exactly what I think happened as well, though Dr. Robertson does not indicate this to the readers (see GiftNTT, 93-95=GiftNTT2000, 75-77).

In addition, Dr. Robertson says that none of these commentators suggests, “that the Spirit has contradicted himself” (p. 111). The problem with this objection is that I do not suggest that the Spirit has contradicted himself either, but Dr. Robertson does not indicate that to his readers. More precisely, I think that *the interpretation given by some of these prophets* contradicted the true message of the Holy Spirit that Paul had earlier received, and that he was following as he went up to Jerusalem.

The difficulty with the entire passage, and one which Dr. Robertson nowhere mentions or deals with, is the fact that the expression “through the Spirit” (in Greek, *dia tou pneumatos*) modifies the verb “they were telling” in the Greek text (it modifies the imperfect verb, *elegon*). That is why the verse is translated, “And *through the Spirit they were telling* Paul not to go on to Jerusalem” (italics added). So here is speech given “through the Spirit” that Paul disobeys! This fits well with a view of prophecy that includes revelation given by the Holy Spirit and an interpretation and report of that revelation that is given in merely human words, words that the Holy Spirit does not superintend or claim as his own, words that can have a mixture of truth and error in them. This is why the prophecies have to be tested, and this is why Paul feels free to disobey in this case.

This verse gives strong evidence for a different kind of prophecy in the New Testament church, a prophecy that does not have the absolute authority of God’s very words.

#### **f. Acts 21:11**

As Paul continued on his journey he came to Caesarea, and Luke explains what happened:

While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’” (Acts 21:10-11, ESV)

My argument here is that Agabus made a mistake in the two major components of his prophecy. First, the Jews did not “bind” Paul, but Luke in the following verses twice points out that the Romans bound Paul (Acts 21:33 and Acts 22:29, both times using the same verb (Greek *deo*) which Agabus used in Acts 21:11). In addition, the Jews did not “deliver” Paul into the hands of the Gentiles, because the Greek word translated “deliver,” the verb *paradidomi*, always refers to “an action that is consciously, intentionally done by the one doing the ‘delivering’” (GiftNTT, 97=GiftNTT2000, 78). I think this is quite a strong argument because *paradidomi* is used 119 times in the New Testament and in every example the idea is one of voluntarily handing over or delivering someone or something. But this is just the *opposite* of what the Jews did in Jerusalem, for they were beating Paul and trying to

kill him, and the tribune and the Roman soldiers had to rescue Paul from them by force (Acts 21:32-36).

So in both cases the things that Agabus predicted were not fulfilled. In fact, the later narrative in Acts explicitly points out how things turned out other than the way Agabus had predicted. This indicates a different kind of prophecy than the Old Testament prophecies, in which every word was from God, and every prediction had to be fulfilled accurately.

Dr. Robertson's first response is to say, "the sketch of the tumultuous scene hardly tells the whole tale, and it is quite possible that things occurred exactly as Agabus predicted" (p. 114). Once again, Dr. Robertson is forced to base his argument on something that has no basis at all in the text of Scripture. *Nothing* in Acts says that the Jews bound Paul, but Dr. Robertson says that the Jews bound Paul. The Bible however, says, that the Romans bound Paul. *Nothing* in the text of Acts says that the Jews "delivered" or "handed over" Paul to the Gentiles. But Dr. Robertson says that the Jews delivered Paul to the Gentiles. In fact, the text says just the opposite of what Dr. Robertson says. The text of the Bible says that the Jews fought violently to keep from handing over Paul to the Gentiles, but Dr. Robertson says that it is "quite possible" that they did so anyway. Once again, it seems to me that it is Dr. Robertson, not I, who is basing his argument on things that are not found in the text of the Bible.

Then in an amazing section that surprised me, Dr. Robertson goes on to accuse me of an "unrealistic precisionism" (p. 114) in interpreting the Bible and says that

while on occasion the prophetic word of the Lord may manifest detailed preciseness, it certainly is not always the case. In an earlier chapter of Acts, Phillip quotes Isaiah 53 as prophesying the sufferings of Christ (Acts 8:32-35)...Yet in that chapter it is stated that the suffering servant of the Lord was assigned a grave with the wicked and was with the rich in his death (Isaiah 53:9). Yet according to the record of the New Testament his grave was with the rich and he was with the wicked in his death. Is it to be concluded that Isaiah the prophet erred in the details of his prediction? Or is it not of the nature of Biblical prophecy that is not precisionistic in its form? My point is not to prove prophecy of the Old Testament under the Old Covenant to be in error. Instead the point is to liberate the Scriptures from an unrealistic precisionism that does not characterized the Lord's word" (p. 114).

I was taken aback by this argument. The doctrine of Biblical inerrancy is the doctrine that the Bible is without error in everything it affirms. If the prophecy of Isaiah was confused and wrongly predicted that Jesus would die with the rich, and that he would have his grave with the wicked, then that would be two errors in the Bible. I fail to understand how Dr. Robertson can continue to hold to the inerrancy of Scripture and

say that the Bible can have detailed mistakes in it of this nature, especially in this wonderful chapter that predicts in such detail the suffering and death of the Messiah.

In fact, the words of Isaiah 53 do not predict what Dr. Robertson claims. The excellent commentary by J. Alec Motyer translates the Hebrew text of Isaiah 53:9 literally, “one assigned his grave/his grave was assigned with wicked ones and with the rich one in his deaths” (J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Leicester, England: InterVarsity, and Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1993, p. 435). Motyer then discusses the actual Hebrew wording and concludes as follows:

In summary: since the Servant was condemned as a criminal, the natural expectation was that he would be brought to a criminal’s grave but, on the contrary, following a superb / real / violent death he was found ‘with a rich man’....How could a condemned man receive a rich man’s burial?...Delitzsch has the ring of truth when he writes that ‘without the commentary supplied by the fulfillment it would be impossible to understand verse nine at all.’ Like other enigmas of this Song, this too is written so that when the turn of events provides the explanation we shall know for certain that we stand in the presence of the Servant of the Lord (p. 436).

In other words, the combination of being initially designated for a grave with the wicked but then actually being given a grave with a rich man is such an unusual, humanly unpredictable event, accurately prophesied by Isaiah 53:9, that it confirms in its detailed precision the divine authorship of this marvelous prediction.

But Dr. Robertson says that to depend on such details is “unrealistic precisionism.” I think it is rather a belief in the total inerrancy of Scripture. And I am surprised that Dr. Robertson seems to think differently at this point.

How different from Isaiah is the inaccurate of prediction of Agabus! He probably had a vision (from the Holy Spirit) of Paul being taken away by the Romans, surrounded by an angry Jewish mob, and he gave the vision his own interpretation, thinking that the Jews had probably *bound* Paul and *given him over* to the Romans. Agabus reported the vision with his own interpretation, and therefore as a New Testament prophet he had some mistakes in his prophecy, though it was close to the actual situation. Paul’s response was appropriate: he continued to go to Jerusalem, even though he knew that suffering awaited him there.

Once again, however, this passage provides strong evidence of a lesser kind of prophecy in the New Testament church, a prophecy that did not consist of the very words of God.

#### **g. Ephesians 2:20**

Paul writes,



So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-20).

My argument in this passage was that the absence of the definite article before the word for “prophets” in Greek allowed for the possibility that “apostles and prophets” consisted of one group, namely, “apostle-prophets” or apostles who were functioning in a prophetic role. This thought was further supported by the same expression in Ephesians 3:5 in which Paul said that the mystery of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church “had now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (here also the Greek word for “prophets” had no definite article before it).

My argument was based on a technical point in Greek grammar, in which one definite article preceding two nouns indicates that the nouns are in some sense viewed as a unity, and in some cases they refer to one group or one item described with two different words (I make this argument in GiftNTT, 47-62 = GiftNTT2000, 329-346, including an additional note regarding Dan Wallace’s objection to my understanding, on pp. 345-346).

I do see these “apostles and prophets” or “apostle-prophets” as foundational to the New Testament church, and I see them as therefore a group that existed only for a short time at the beginning of the church and did not continue. Whether they were only apostles functioning as prophets, or whether there are two groups consisting of the apostles and a few other prophets who laid the foundation of the church and spoke with apostolic authority, does not make very much difference to my overall argument (as I explained in GiftNTT, p. 62 and repeat in GiftNTT2000, p. 13). But whatever position one takes on these foundational figures in Ephesians 2:20, my argument is that *they are different from the ordinary prophets in all the churches at the time of the New Testament*, people who were converted long after the foundation of the church had been laid, but who were given the gift of prophecy by the Holy Spirit and continued to function in a way that was not foundational to the church. These are the people who have the gift of ordinary congregational prophecy, about which we are concerned, but Ephesians 2:20 is not talking about them.

Dr. Robertson responds by saying,

Both in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11 the two offices unquestionably are separated from one another by the use of the definite article in one case and the use of ‘first’ (apostles) and ‘secondly’ (prophets) in the other. The explicit separation of the two offices in the mind of Paul must certainly bear more exegetical weight than a mere grammatical possibility (p. 116).

In other words, Dr. Robertson is saying that in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11 “apostles” and “prophets” are different offices and this is shown by the grammatical structure that clearly separates them into two groups.

But this is exactly what I argued myself! My point was to say that in passages like 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11 the gift of *ordinary congregational prophecy* is in view, not this foundational function of the apostles. That is why “apostles” are a separate group in those passages. In those passages the grammar is different, and the meaning is therefore different (see GiftNTT, p. 49, 59-61=GiftNTT2000, p. 333, 342-343). But this means that Dr. Robertson has not shown that these “prophets” in Ephesians 2:20 are the same, for the grammatical structure and the contextual information are so different.

#### **h. 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22**

Here Paul writes,

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

My argument here is that when Paul tells the Thessalonians not to “despise” prophecies, this implies that they knew that prophecies in the New Testament church have a lesser status than the words of Scripture. The Thessalonian church regarded the Word of God very highly, for Paul says to them, “when you received the word which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). So if the Thessalonians had thought that prophecies being given in their own congregational meeting were equal to the word of God, they would have esteemed them very highly, and there would have been no need for Paul to tell them not to “despise” them. This indicates that prophecy was not thought of as being the very words of God, but had a lesser status in New Testament churches, and lesser authority.

In addition, the fact that Paul tells the, “do not despise prophecies, but *test everything*; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21) implies that they would evaluate the prophecies and sort the good from the bad, sort what was from God from what was just the prophet’s own interpretation, and hold fast those things that were genuinely from the Lord. Paul does not tell them to test every *prophet*, but to “test all things,” which most likely means all the things spoken in the prophecies he had mentioned in the previous phrase. This again implies a process of sifting and sorting the various things spoken during the prophecies, and sorting out what was from the Lord and what was merely a human idea.

Dr. Robertson’s first response is to give a different meaning to “despise” in 1 Thessalonians 5:20. He writes,

Paul says that prophecies are not to be treated with contempt. Literally he states that they must not be regarded as though they were nothing....For 400 years the prophetic gift had not functioned....It is quite reasonable then that the new community of believers would be extremely suspicious of claims that new revelations were coming in the form of contemporary prophetic utterances. Their natural inclination might well have been to treat them as though they were nothing. In their minds, contemporary prophecy did not exist (p. 117).

There are two problems with this reinterpretation of “despise” in 1 Thessalonians 5:20. First, no English translation known to me gives anything close to the sense, “do not treat prophecies *as though they did not exist*.” And no such meaning as “to treat as though something does not exist” is given for the Greek word *exoutheneo* in the BDAG lexicon (p. 352; “disdain,” “reject disdainfully,” “treat with contempt”; compare BDAG, 277: “despise, disdain”). So Dr. Robertson is asking us to believe a meaning for this verse that no lexicon supports and no translation supports. Once again, it may be asked which position is actually based on supposition rather than the words of the text of Scripture itself?

But the second difficulty with Dr. Robertson’s position at this point is his attempt to persuade us that in the minds of the church at Thessalonica, “contemporary prophecy did not exist” (p. 117). But the apostle Paul himself had founded the church and had taught there long enough to support himself with his own work as a tentmaker (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8), and long enough that he had received more than one contribution sent to support him from the church at Philippi (Philippians 4:15-16). Paul had been there, perhaps several months. And he had never mentioned the gift of prophecy? Does Dr. Robertson think that in the course of several months of establishing a new church Paul had just forgotten to mention anything about spiritual gifts?

In addition, Dr. Robertson’s position must ask us to believe that the church at Thessalonica had never heard of Pentecost or the sermon of Peter with which the New Testament church had begun in Acts 2, in which the Holy Spirit’s outpouring of the gift of prophecy featured prominently. Dr. Robertson’s position asks us to believe that the Thessalonian church, which was made up of a large component of Gentile Christians, had never heard of the prophecies concerning the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church. And then we must recognize that when Paul came to Thessalonica Silas was with him (Acts 17:4) and Acts 15:32 identifies Silas himself as a prophet: “and Judas and Silas, *who were themselves prophets*, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.” So Dr. Robertson’s argument asks us to believe that Silas the prophet had been present for perhaps several months establishing the church at Thessalonica, but still they had never heard of the gift of prophecy and, in the minds of the Thessalonians, “contemporary prophecy did not exist” (p. 117). The position of Dr. Robertson is again based on nothing in the text of Scripture, and seems contradicted by a number of facts in the Bible itself.

In addition, Dr. Robertson reports my own view somewhat inaccurately when he says, with reference to me, “the counter-proposal is that under the Old Covenant only the prophet himself was to be tested, not his message (p. 105f.)” (p. 118). But this is not what I said. I said that not every prophecy of a *true* prophet was to be tested. Surely there were false prophets in the Old Testament, and they were revealed by their false doctrine and by their predictions that did not come true (GiftNTT, p. 105=GiftNTT2000, p. 85: “not every prophecy of a true prophet was tested in this way”).

In conclusion, it seems to me that Paul’s command to the Thessalonians, “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21) provides strong evidence for the fact that the gift of prophecy in the New Testament church was not reporting the very words of God, but was a merely human report of something the prophet thought God had brought to his mind.

## **8. The Argument from the Potential to Bring into Doubt the Truth of Actual Prophecies of Scripture**

Near the end of his analysis, Dr. Robertson warns that my view of prophecy might lead to doubting the very words of Scripture. He says of my position, “Once this mindset of seeking errors in the prophecies of Scripture is assumed, the Old Covenant prophecies will appear to be not materially different from New Covenant prophecies....Once that position has been taken, the same mixture of truth and error may be found in all of prophecy, even in Scripture itself” (p. 125).

But this is just the opposite of what I argued in my book. My point was that the gift of prophecy in the New Testament church was *different* from the prophecies which were written in the very words of God in Scripture in the Old Testament. Dr. Robertson’s argument here is essentially saying that though I now view prophecy in New Testament church as *different* from Old Testament prophecy in the Bible, I will soon come to see them as *the same*. Or another way of putting this is to say that I will someday adopt the opposite of my current position.

We should simply state this argument for what it is. It is saying that some day in the future I will take a position different from the position I have taken. Needless to say, I do not consider this to be a strong argument against the position that I actually hold.

## **9. The Argument from the Loss of Freedom of Conscience**

Dr. Robertson writes,

Thirdly, the consequential loss of the freedom of the Christian must be recognized. To the degree that a ‘prophetic utterance’ addresses the concrete circumstances of an individual, to that degree a person has lost the right to decide the course of life for himself in the light of his own conscience as instructed by the word of God (pp. 128-129).

My response to this is to say that if God chooses to guide us through subjective reading of the Holy Spirit, or through the contemporary gift of prophecy, then, yes, we are not free to ignore guidance from the Lord himself. Whenever God has guided me through the work of the Holy Spirit into a specific course of action in my life, I have “lost the right to decide the course of life for (myself)” but I have given up that right to the One who is my Lord and King forever, and who relates to me in a personal way, and I am thankful for that kind of “loss of freedom” because it is a loss of a wrongful self-autonomy that would reject the direction and guidance of my Lord.

I should add here, however, that while I think God can guide individual Christians in specific decisions in life, I also want to affirm strongly that the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture, and the doctrine of the freedom of conscience of the individual, means that *no contemporary prophecy, and no sense of subjective guidance from God, should ever become the basis for a church to declare what all Christians should do.* Only the teachings of the Word of God can do that. To give an example, I was convinced at one point in my life that God was leading me to cancel my subscription to the *Chicago Tribune*, mainly because I was spending too much time reading it each morning. I did cancel it, and I thought I was doing so out of obedience to God. I still believe that to be the case for that point in my life. But it would have been wrong for me to go to church the next Sunday and then proclaim, “The Lord has told me that everybody should give up their subscription to the *Chicago Tribune*.” This would be imposing a rule of conduct on believers that I could not support or defend from the Scripture itself. This would be a wrongful violation of the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. This would be elevating a perception of personal, individual guidance to the status of a moral command with Scriptural authority over the whole church, and I do not believe that that can ever happen in this age.

#### **10. The Argument that if New Revelation Continues Today it Challenges the Sufficiency of Scripture**

This argument is related to the previous section. Dr. Robertson writes,

And why not both? Why not the illumination of Scripture coupled with new revelations of the Spirit? Simply because if you declare a need for both, you have implied the insufficiency of the one (p. 135).

My reply to this is to say that the question of “insufficiency” must be more carefully defined. Does the existence of the gift of teaching in the church today prove the “insufficiency” of Scripture? Does the existence of the gift of wisdom in the church today prove the “insufficiency” of Scripture? No, because *these are different categories* of things, and because we believe that God has given *both* Scripture and the gift of teaching. He has given both Scripture and the gift of wisdom. In the same way, the Bible and contemporary guidance by the Holy Spirit are different categories of things. The Bible and the continuing gift of prophecy today are different categories of things. The existence of the one does not imply the insufficiency of the other. It is rather that

God has given both for his good purposes and for the benefit of his people. The Scripture is our only absolute and final authority for all doctrine and conduct of life, but God can use subjective guidance by the Holy Spirit and contemporary prophecy to reveal to us other aspects of a particular situation that will be helpful in making decisions in our life.

## 11. Some comments on Dr. Robertson's arguments about the gift of tongues

At the end of this analysis of Dr. Robertson's book, I would like to add some brief comments on his analysis on the gift of tongues, but not in as much detail as the previous material.

With regard to 1 Corinthians 14:14, "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful," Dr. Robertson says that this means that Paul offers prayers within his soul, but that he *does understand* what he is praying (p. 31). He takes "my mind is unfruitful" to mean that *nobody else* understands what the person is praying, but the speaker himself understands.

However, his explanation here fails even to consider the more common interpretation of this passage, that *the speaker himself does not understand*, and that is what Paul means by "my mind is unfruitful." Nor does Dr. Robertson explain why that is not a better interpretation of the meaning. Paul does not say "my *words* are unfruitful" or "my *speech* is unfruitful," but "my *mind* is unfruitful," which most likely means that Paul himself does not understand. When Paul says in the next verse, "What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also" (1 Cor. 14:15), he contrasts prayer with his spirit and prayer with his mind, which also suggests that when Paul prays in tongues (prayer with his spirit) he himself does not understand. And that is why one who speaks in tongues "should pray for the power to interpret" (1 Cor. 14:13). If he always understood it in the first place he would certainly not need to pray for the power to interpret it. So Dr. Robertson's explanation does not fit well with the words of the text.

Dr. Robertson also argues that tongues are always foreign languages, that is human languages spoken by someone in another country or language group (p. 33-37). But in this entire discussion he does not address the fact that Paul says of one who is speaking in a tongue, "*no one* understands him." If speaking in tongues in the church at Corinth were always a foreign language, then surely in such a cosmopolitan city as Corinth, sometimes the foreign language would be understood by other people (as it was at Pentecost). Dr. Robertson does not address this verse.

I do not think that the fact that the tongues in 1 Corinthians 14 "were translatable" suggests "that they were foreign languages" (p. 35), because I think that it only shows us that the tongues carried meaning. But they still could have been heavenly language or an angelic language (see 1 Cor. 13:1), or some other kind of special language given by God for this purpose. I see no reason to think that they were always foreign languages present on the earth at that time.

I also am not persuaded by Dr. Robertson's argument that tongues should never be spoken in private (p. 39). Robertson argues that the gift of tongues should always be spoken in church. But what about what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:18-19:

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, *in church* I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others than ten thousand words in tongues.

What then is the contrast to "in church"? If Dr. Robertson thinks that the gift of tongues always had to function in a public setting, and that Paul spoke in tongues more than all the Corinthians, but that he would rather speak five intelligible words in a church, then Robertson never explains exactly where it is that Paul is speaking in tongues more than all the Corinthians. The natural explanation is that Paul is speaking in tongues privately.

And then we go to 1 Corinthians 14:28: "But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God." How does Dr. Robertson avoid private tongue speaking in this verse? He says,

Paul makes the point that the tongues-speaker without an interpreter is to remain silent, speaking to himself and to God (verse 28). The two actions are simultaneous. As he restrains himself until an interpreter is present, he speaks within himself while communing with God (p. 40).

It is significant that when Dr. Robertson refers to this verse he leaves out the conjunction "and." This conjunction (represented by the conjunction *de* in Greek) shows that the two actions are separate; they are not different ways of saying the same action. The verse says, "But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church *and* speak to himself and to God" (italics added). Paul's meaning is that in church the person speaking in tongues is to remain silent, but privately he is to "speak to himself and to God" (1 Cor. 14:28). Essentially Dr. Robertson's position asks us to think that "speak" in this verse describes an activity of "not speaking." His interpretation is the opposite of what the text of Scripture actually says, and the contrast with "in church" implies that such speaking is to be done in private.

Then Dr. Robertson considers another passage related to speaking in tongues:

In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers (1Cor. 14:21-22).

Dr. Robertson argues that, in light of Old Testament parallels, this passage shows that tongues are a *sign of judgment* on the unbelieving Jews (p. 41-50). Therefore his conclusion is that Christians should not speak in tongues and thereby perpetuate this sign of judgment on unbelieving Jews that was given at Pentecost as a "sign of covenantal curse for Israel" (p. 47).

But Dr. Robertson here misses the point of the Biblical teaching in a number of ways. First, while Robertson's conclusion is that Christians should not continue to give the negative judgmental sign of speaking in tongues, he fails to mention to readers that Paul's entire point here is to talk about tongues *without interpretation*. Paul's conclusion (in contrast to Dr. Robertson's) is not that Christians should avoid speaking in tongues, but, "if any speak in a tongue, let there be two or at most three, and each in turn, *and let someone interpret*" (1 Cor. 14:27, italics added). I agree that Paul's quotation from Isaiah 28 (in 1 Cor. 14:21) shows that God was bringing judgment on the unbelieving people in Israel when he sent the Assyrians speaking a language that they did not even understand. That is why Paul tells the Corinthians not to speak in tongues *without interpretation* in the church -- he does not want them to give a sign of judgment to people who come in and do not understand what is being said! But Paul's solution is not to avoid the gift of tongues, for he never says that tongues *plus interpretation* constitute this negative sign of judgment. When tongues are interpreted, then they can be understood even by visitors, and there is no sign of judgment at all, but they are a gift that functions for the benefit of the church.

This is related to Dr. Robertson's misunderstanding of the function of tongues at Pentecost as reported in Acts 2. In contrast to the judgment that Isaiah speaks of in Isaiah 28 where the people of Israel did not understand the Assyrians, the narrative in Acts 2 is just the opposite, for Luke tells us that "there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven" and they were amazed asking, "How is it that we hear each of us in his own native language?" (Acts 2:5,8). In this case the Jewish people *understood*, and in this case they *believed*, and in this case the tongues that they understood were a sign of *blessing*, not a sign of judgment or a curse. So it seems to me that Dr. Robertson entirely mistakes the function of tongues in Acts 2 and the function of Paul's quotation in 1 Corinthians 14:21.<sup>3</sup>

## 12. The argument from a contrast between Paul's earliest and latest writings

Dr. Robertson also argues for the cessation of miraculous gifts, and especially the gift of prophecy, from a contrast that he sees between Paul's earliest and latest writings. Paul mentions prophecy in 1 Corinthians, Romans, 1 Thessalonians and Ephesians because those were early in his ministry. But then Dr. Robertson says,

But the level of interest in the gifts of tongues and prophecy declines dramatically in the last writings of Paul. In his first letter to Timothy, the gift of prophecy is not mentioned except with reference to the prophecy that had been uttered earlier at the time of Timothy's ordination (1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14). The gifts of tongues and prophecy are nowhere mentioned in Titus or 2 Timothy....what has happened? Is it to be concluded that these gifts related to new revelation still were functioning

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<sup>3</sup> I argued this point at some length in an article in the *Westminster Theological Journal* in 1979; see Wayne Grudem, "1 Cor. 14:20-25: Prophecy and Tongues as Signs of God's Attitude," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41:2 (spring 1979), 381-396. Dr. Robertson does not mention my article or my argument in his book.



widely at this late date in the Apostolic Age, since no command forbidding them has been issued? The precise opposite would seem to be the case....(p.75).

Before any inspired Scriptures of the new covenant had been provided to the church, the revelational gifts of prophecy and tongues were being exercised extensively....but Paul's stress at the end of his life on the importance of holding fast to the doctrine, the tradition, the faith that had been revealed provides a different picture altogether. A process has been completed, an era has come to an end....so the New Testament provides significant evidence of the decline of the revelational gifts (p. 77).

In response, I suppose this kind of argument could be made about any topic that is not discussed in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, which were Paul's last writings. For example, the Lord's Supper is mentioned only in 1 Corinthians 11. Should we then conclude that people were not celebrating the Lord's Supper at the end of Paul's lifetime, since he does not mention it in 1 or 2 Timothy or in Titus? No doubt dozens of other topics could likewise be excluded, and soon we would have a canon that consists only of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus!

No, this is simply an argument from silence, and not a very persuasive one at that. *All* of the New Testament epistles were written to the Christians in the church age, the age in which we still live today. *All* of the New Testament epistles contain instructions that are directly relevant for us in our lives today.

In fact, when we look at the actual dates of these epistles, the time difference between Paul's "earliest" and "latest" writings that Dr. Robertson proposes is very small indeed. The dates commonly assigned for 1 Corinthians (55A.D.), Romans (57A.D.), and Ephesians (60A.D.), are not much earlier than 1 Timothy and Titus (63-65A.D.), or 2 Timothy (67-68A.D.). Are we to think that in all the churches of the Mediterranean world the gifts of prophecy and tongues were flourishing abundantly in 60A.D. but suddenly came to a halt in 63A.D? What about all those thousands of Christians who had these gifts? Were they suddenly to stop using them? Once again this is another argument in Dr. Robertson's book that is based on no explicit statement anywhere in the text of Scripture, and it is a "supposition" that has no clear evidence to support it. It is a supposition that is quite difficult to believe.

In addition, Dr. Robertson fails to consider the evidence for the continuation of the gift of prophecy in 1 John, which was probably written sometime between 85-95 A.D. John has to warn against false prophets, and his warning assumes that there is still a true gift of prophecy functioning in the church. He doesn't say that they should reject everyone who claims to be a prophet, but he says to test them:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from

God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already (1 John 4:1-4).

So did these gifts in hundreds or even thousands of churches suddenly die out between 60 & 63A.D. and suddenly reappear in 85A.D? Once again this is a supposition with no real evidence to support it, and it is not persuasive.

**Conclusion:**

I am grateful for the opportunity to interact at last with Dr. Robertson's extensive argument. Although I do not find myself in agreement with him, his book has caused me to go back once again to the text of the New Testament to see if his arguments were persuasive, or if Scripture actually does support (as I earlier claimed) a kind of prophecy that did not convey the very words of God, but was merely human words reporting what God brought to mind. After looking at many passages in Acts and the Epistles, my conclusion still is that the existence of this kind of prophecy in the New Testament church is well established by many passages of Scripture, and we should expect that it would continue in the church today as well.

17, 489 words