

Why Christians Can Still PROPHESY

Scripture encourages us to seek this gift yet today.

WAYNE A. GRUDEM

One key difference between many evangelicals and charismatic believers is their attitude toward the gift of prophecy. In charismatic worship, it is not unusual for one or more persons to deliver "a word from the Lord." Some evangelicals believe Scripture has ruled out that possibility. Others feel uneasy or just plain skeptical when face to face with someone who claims to speak on God's behalf.

In the following essay, condensed from the forthcoming CT book Tough Questions Christians Ask, exegete Wayne Grudem examines what the New Testament says about the gift of prophecy and offers biblical counsel for its use in both charismatic and noncharismatic churches.

Can evangelical Christians use the gift of prophecy in their churches today? What is this spiritual gift, and how does it function? And if we do allow for its use, how can

we guard against abuse and preserve the unique authority of Scripture in our lives?

An examination of the New Testament teaching on this gift will show that it should be defined not as "predicting the future," or "proclaiming a word from the Lord," or "powerful preaching"—but rather as "telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind." Once we understand prophecy this way, we can allow our churches room to enjoy one of the Holy

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Spirit's most edifying gifts.

Less authority than Scripture

How did the New Testament church regard the gift of prophecy? Did it have more or less authority than Scripture or apostolic teaching? Let us compare what the two testaments say about prophecy.

Old Testament prophets had an amazing responsibility—to speak and write words that had absolute divine authority. They could say, "Thus says the Lord," and what followed were the very words of God. They wrote their words as God's words in Scripture for all time (see Deut. 18:18–20; Jer. 1:9; Num. 22:38; Ezek. 2:7). Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey a prophet's words was to disbelieve or disobey God (Deut. 18:19; 1 Sam. 8:7; 1 Kings 20:36).

In the New Testament there were also people who could speak and write God's very words and record them as Scripture. However, Jesus no longer called them "prophets," but used a new term, "apostles." The apostles are the New Testament counterpart to the Old Testament prophets (see, for example, Gal. 1:8–9, 11–12; 1 Cor. 2:13; 14:37; 2 Cor. 13:3; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:8, 15; 2 Pet. 3:2). It is the apostles, not the prophets, who have authority to write the words of New Testament Scripture. And when

the apostles want to establish their unique authority, they never appeal to the title *prophet*, but rather call themselves "apostles" (Rom. 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1).

Why did Jesus use this new term? It was probably because the Greek word *prophētēs* at the time of the New Testament had a very broad range of meanings. It generally did not have the sense of "one who speaks God's very words," but rather "one who speaks on the basis of some external influence" (often a spiritual influence of some kind).

Titus 1:12 uses the word this way, where Paul quotes a pagan poet: "One of their own *prophets* has said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons'" (NIV). The soldiers who mock Jesus also seem to use the word *prophecy* this way, when they blindfold Jesus and demand, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" (Luke 22:64). They do not mean, "Speak words of absolute divine authority," but "Tell us something that has been revealed to you."

Many writings outside the Bible use the Greek word *prophētēs* in this way, without signifying any divine authority in the words of the "prophet." In fact, by the time of the New Testament, the term *prophet* in everyday use often simply meant "one who has supernatural knowledge" or "one who predicts the future"—or even just "spokesman"

(without any connotation of divine authority).

Of course, the words *prophet* and *prophecy* could sometimes be used of the apostles when the context emphasized an external spiritual influence (from the Holy Spirit) under which they spoke (see Rev. 1:3; 22:7; Eph. 2:20; 3:5), but this was not the ordinary terminology used for the apostles, nor did the terms *prophet* and *prophecy* in themselves imply divine authority for their speech or writing.

Much more commonly, *prophet* and *prophecy* were used of ordinary Christians who spoke not with absolute divine authority, but simply to report something God had laid on their hearts or brought to their minds. There are many indications in the New Testament that this ordinary gift of prophecy had authority less than that of the Bible, and even less than that of recognized Bible teaching in the early church.

Testing the prophecies

There are clear indications that New Testament prophets did not speak with divine authority. For example, in Acts 21:4, we read of the disciples at Tyre: "Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." This seems to be a reference to prophecy directed towards Paul, but Paul disobeyed it. He never would have done this if this prophecy contained God's very words.

Then in Acts 21:10–11, Agabus prophesied that the Jews at Jerusalem would "bind Paul and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles," a prediction that was only nearly correct—the Romans, not the Jews, bound Paul (v. 33), and the Jews did not deliver him voluntarily, but tried to kill him, and Paul had to be taken from them by force. Such inaccuracies in detail would have called into question the validity of any Old Testament prophet.

Paul tells the Thessalonians, "Do not despise prophesying, but test everything, hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess. 5:20–21). If prophecy had equalled God's word in authority, he would never have had to tell them not to despise it, for they had "received" and "accepted" God's word "with joy from the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13; cf. 4:15). But when Paul tells them to "test everything," it must include the prophecies mentioned in the previous phrase. He implies that prophecies contain some things that are good and some that are not when he encourages them to "hold

Is Prophecy Too Subjective?

The "gift of prophecy" requires waiting on the Lord, listening for his prompting in our hearts. Christians who are completely evangelical, doctrinally sound, intellectual, and "objective," probably need most the balancing influence of a vital "subjective" relationship with the Lord. And these people are also those who have the least likelihood of being led into error, for they already place great emphasis on solid grounding in the Word of God.

Yet there is an opposite danger of excessive reliance on subjective impressions for guidance, and we must clearly guard against that. People who continually seek subjective messages from God to guide their lives must be cautioned that subjective personal guidance is *not* the main function of New Testament prophecy. They need to place more emphasis on seeking God's sure wisdom written in Scripture.

Many charismatic writers would agree with this caution from Anglican charismatic pastor Michael Harper: "Prophecies which tell other people what they are to do—are to be regarded with great suspicion."

And Donald Gee of the Assemblies of God says, "Many of our errors where spiritual gifts are concerned arise when we want the extraordinary and exceptional to be made the frequent and habitual. Let all who develop excessive desire for 'messages' through the gifts take warning from the wreckage of past generations as well as of contemporaries. . . . The Holy Scriptures are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." □

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fast to that which is good." This could never have been said of the words of an Old Testament prophet, or the authoritative teachings of a New Testament apostle.

Moreover, in Acts 21:9, we read that Philip had "four unmarried daughters who prophesied." Whatever we may think about the appropriateness of Bible teaching by women today, this prophesying would be difficult to reconcile with prohibitions against authoritative teaching by women (see 1 Tim. 2:12) if prophecy had absolute divine authority, or even authority greater than or equal to Bible teaching. Similar reasoning applies to 1 Corinthians 11:5 where Paul allows women to prophesy in church even though he later apparently forbids them to speak up publicly during the evaluation or judging of prophecies (1 Cor. 14:34-35).

Sifting prophecies in Corinth

Let us look more closely at 1 Corinthians 14, where extensive evidence on New Testament prophecy can be found. When Paul says, "Let two or three prophets speak and let the others weigh what is said" (v. 29), he suggests that they should listen carefully and sift the good from the bad. We cannot imagine that an Old Testament prophet like Isaiah would have said, "Listen to what I say and weigh what is said—sort the good from the bad, what you accept from what you should not accept"! If prophecy had absolute divine authority, this would have been sin. But here Paul commands that it be done.

In verse 30, Paul allows one prophet to interrupt another one: "If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one." If prophets had been speaking God's very words, it is hard to imagine that Paul would say they should be interrupted and not allowed to finish their message.

Paul suggests that no one at Corinth, a church that had much prophecy, was able to speak God's very words. He says in verse 36, "What! Did the word of God come forth from you, or are you the only ones it has reached?"

All these passages indicate that the

common idea that prophets spoke "words of the Lord" when the apostles were not present in the early churches is simply incorrect.

There is one other type of evidence that New Testament congregational prophets spoke with less authority than the apostles or Scripture: The apostles did not solve the problem of who would speak for God when they were gone by encouraging Christians to listen to "prophets," but by pointing to Scripture.

So Paul, at the end of his life, emphasizes "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15), and the "God-breathed" character of Scripture "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Jude urges his readers to "contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Peter, at the end of his life, encourages his readers to "pay attention" to Scripture, which is like "a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Pet. 1:19-20), and reminds them of the teaching of the apostle Paul "in all his letters" (2 Pet. 3:16). In no case do we read exhortations to "give heed to the prophets in your churches" or to "obey the words of the Lord through your prophets."

There certainly were prophets in local congregations after the death of the apostles. But it seems they did not have authority equal to the apostles—and the authors of Scripture knew that.

Not "the words of God" for today

If the New Testament authors considered congregational prophecies to be sometimes flawed and definitely less authoritative than either Scripture or apostolic teaching, we in the church today should consider prophecy to be merely human words, *not* God's words, and not equal to God's words in authority. But does this conclusion conflict with current charismatic teaching or practice? I think it conflicts with much charismatic *practice*, but not with most charismatic *teaching*.

Most charismatic teachers today would agree that contemporary prophecy is not equal to Scripture in authority. Though some speak of prophecy as being the "word of God" for today, there

is almost uniform testimony from all segments of the charismatic movement that prophecy is imperfect and impure, and will contain elements that are not to be obeyed or trusted.

For example, Bruce Yocum, author of a charismatic book on prophecy, writes, "Prophecy can be impure—our own thoughts or ideas can get mixed into the message we receive—whether we receive the words directly or only receive a sense of the message. . . . (Paul says that all our prophecy is imperfect.)"

But it must be said that *in actual practice* much confusion results from the habit of prefacing prophecies with the Old Testament phrase "Thus says the Lord" (a phrase not used by any recorded prophets in New Testament churches). This is unfortunate, because it gives the impression that the words that follow are God's very words, whereas most responsible charismatic spokesmen would not want to claim it for every part of their prophecies anyway. There would be much gain and no loss if that phrase were dropped.

If someone really does think God is bringing something to mind that should be reported in the congregation, there is nothing wrong with saying, "I think the Lord is putting on my mind that . . ." or some similar expression. Of course, that does not sound as forceful as "Thus says the Lord," but if it is really from God, the Holy Spirit will cause it to speak with great power to the hearts of those who need to hear.

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If prophecy does not contain God's very words, then in what sense is it a gift from God?

Paul indicates that God could bring something spontaneously to mind so that the person prophesying would report it in his or her own words. Paul calls this a "revelation": "If a revelation is made to another sitting by, 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).

Paul is simply referring to something that God may bring to mind or impress on someone's heart in such a way that

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the person has a sense that it is from God. It may be that the thought is surprisingly distinct from the person's own train of thought, or accompanied by a sense of urgency or persistence.

Thus, if a stranger comes in and all prophesy, "the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (1 Cor. 14:25). I heard a report of this happening in a clearly noncharismatic Baptist church in America: A missionary speaker paused in the middle of his message and said something like this: "I didn't plan to say this, but it seems the Lord is indicating that someone in this church has just walked out on his wife and family. If that is so, let me tell you that God

wants you to return to them and learn to follow God's pattern for family life." The missionary did not know it, but in the unlit balcony sat a man who had entered the church for the first time just moments before. The description fit him exactly, and he made himself known, acknowledged his sin, and began to seek after God.

In this way, prophecy serves as a "sign" for believers (1 Cor. 14:22)—a clear demonstration that God is at work in their midst. And since it will work for the conversion of unbelievers as well, Paul encourages this gift to be used when "unbelievers or outsiders enter" (1 Cor. 14:23).

Many of us have experienced or heard of similar events: For example, an unplanned but urgent request may have

been given to pray for certain missionaries. Much later those who prayed discovered that just at that time the missionaries had been in an auto accident or at a point of intense spiritual conflict, and had needed those prayers. Paul would call the intuition of those things a "revelation," and the report to the assembled church of that prompting from God, a "prophecy." It may have elements of the speaker's own understanding in it, and it certainly needs to be tested; yet it is of value in the church.

The benefits of prophecy

Prophecy in the New Testament is not merely "predicting the future." There were some predictions (Acts 11:28; 21:11), but there was also the disclosure of sins (1 Cor. 14:25). In fact, *anything* that edified could have been included, for Paul says, "He who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Cor. 14:3). Here is another indication of the value of prophecy: It could speak to the needs of people's hearts in a spontaneous, direct way.

At two significant points in our marriage, my wife, Margaret, and I visited and prayed with Christian friends in another part of the United States. On both occasions, during our time of prayer, the husband of the family paused and spoke a sentence directly to Margaret. On both occasions, the messages hit home and brought the Lord's comfort regarding deep concerns we had not mentioned at all. Here is the value of prophecy for "upbuilding and encouragement and consolation."

There is another great benefit of prophecy: It provides opportunity for everyone in the congregation to participate, not just those who are skilled speakers or who have gifts of teaching. Paul says he wants all the Corinthians to prophesy (1 Cor. 14:5). And he says, "You can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (v. 31). Greater openness to the gift of prophecy could help cure the malaise in our churches where many are mere spectators. Perhaps we contribute to the problem of spectator Christianity by quenching the work of the Spirit in this area.

Until the Lord comes

Many evangelicals claim that gifts such as prophecy were given to the church for the apostolic age only. The apostle Paul, on the other hand, expected proph-

Prophecy and Teaching: What's the Difference?

New Testament prophecy was based on spontaneous promptings from the Holy Spirit (compare Acts 11:28; 21:4, 10-11; and note also the ideas of prophecy that are represented in Luke 7:39; 22:63-64; John 4:19; 11:51).

By contrast, no human speech that is called "teaching" is ever said to be based on a revelation in the New Testament. Rather, teaching is often simply an explanation or application of Scripture (Acts 15:35; 11:12, 26; Rom. 2:21; 15:4; Col. 3:16; Heb. 5:12) or a repetition and explanation of apostolic instructions (Rom. 16:17; 2 Tim. 2:2; 3:10). It is what we would call "Bible teaching" or "preaching" today.

Although a few people have *claimed* that the prophets in New Testament churches gave "charismatically inspired" interpretations of Scripture, it is hard to find any convincing examples in the New Testament where the "prophet" word group is used to refer to someone interpreting Scripture.

Prophecy has less authority than teaching, and prophecies in the church are always to be subject to the authoritative teaching of Scripture. The Thessalonians were not told to hold firm to the traditions that were "prophesied" to them but to the traditions they were "taught" by Paul (2 Thess. 2:15). It was teachers, not prophets, who gave leadership and direction to the early churches.

Among the elders, therefore, were "those who labor in the word and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17), and an elder was to be "an apt teacher" (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. Titus 1:9). But nothing is said about any elders whose work was prophesying. In his leadership, Timothy was to take heed to himself and to his "teaching" (1 Tim. 4:16), but he was never told to take heed to his prophesying. James warned that those who *teach*, not those who prophesy, will be judged with greater strictness (Jas. 3:1).

The distinction is clear: If a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, containing interpretation and application to life, then it is *teaching*. But if a message is the report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a *prophecy*. Of course, even prepared teachings can be interrupted by unplanned additional material the teacher suddenly feels God is bringing to his mind. This would be a teaching with prophecy mixed in.

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ecy to continue until the Lord returns.

Paul says, "Our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away" (1 Cor. 13:9-10). So he says that prophecy will pass away at a certain time, namely, "when the perfect comes." But when is that? It has to be when the Lord returns, because it has to be the same time indicated by the word *then* in verse 12: "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but *then* face to face. Now I know in part; *then* I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." *Face to face* is an Old Testament phrase for seeing God personally (see Gen. 32:30; Exod. 33:11; Deut. 5:4; 34:10; Judg. 6:22; Ezek. 20:35—the only Old Testament occurrences of this phrase, and they all refer to seeing God). The time when I shall know "as I have been known" also must refer to the Lord's return.

Some have argued that "when the perfect comes" refers to the time when the New Testament canon is complete. (Revelation, the last book to be written, was composed at the latest about 35 years after 1 Corinthians.) But would the Corinthians ever have understood that from what Paul wrote? Is there any mention of a collection of New Testament books anywhere in the context of 1 Corinthians 13? Such an idea is foreign to the context. Moreover, such a statement would not fit Paul's purpose. Would it be persuasive to argue as follows: "We can be sure that love will never end, for we know that it will last more than 35 years!"? This would hardly be convincing. The context requires rather that Paul be contrasting this age with the age to come, and saying that love will endure into eternity.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes that the view that makes "when the perfect comes" equal the time of the completion of the New Testament encounters another difficulty: "It means that you and I, who have the Scriptures open before us, know much more than the apostle Paul of God's truth. . . . It means that we are altogether superior . . . even to the apostles themselves, including the apostle Paul! It means that we are now in a position in which . . . 'we know, even as also we are known' by

God. . . . Indeed, there is only one word to describe such a view, it is nonsense."

The conclusion is that in 1 Corinthians 13:10 Paul says that prophecy will continue in the church until Christ returns.

Paul valued this gift so highly that he told the Corinthians, "Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:1). Then, at the end of his discussion of spiritual gifts, he said again, "So, my brethren, earnestly desire to prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:39). And he said, "He who prophesies edifies the church" (1 Cor. 14:4).

If Paul was eager for the gift of prophecy to function at Corinth, troubled as the church was by immaturity, selfishness, and divisions, then should we not also actively seek this valuable gift in our congregations today? We evangelicals who profess to believe and obey *all* that Scripture says, should we not also believe and obey this? And might a greater openness to the gift of prophecy perhaps help to correct a dangerous imbalance in our church lives, lives that are too often exclusively intellectual, objective, and narrowly doctrinal?

A cautious approach

All Christians who desire to use the gift of prophecy in their churches, but especially pastors and others who have teaching responsibilities, would be wise to take several steps:

- Pray seriously for the Lord's wisdom on how and when to approach this subject in the church.

- Teach on this subject, if you have teaching responsibilities, in the regular Bible teaching times that the church already provides.

- Be patient and proceed slowly—church leaders should not be "domineering" (1 Pet. 5:3), and a patient approach will avoid frightening people or alienating them unnecessarily.

- Recognize and encourage the gift of prophecy in ways it has already been functioning—at church prayer meetings, for example, when someone has felt unusually led by the Spirit to pray for something, or when it has seemed that the Spirit was bringing to mind a hymn

or Scripture passage, or giving a common sense of the focus of a time of group worship.

Even Christians in churches not open to prophecy can be sensitive to promptings from the Holy Spirit regarding what to pray for in church prayer meetings, and can then express those promptings in the form of a prayer.

- If the first four steps have been followed, and if the congregation and its leadership will accept it, make opportunities for the gift of prophecy in the less formal worship services of the church, such as Sunday evenings, Wednesday prayer meetings, or smaller house groups. If this is allowed, those who prophesy should be kept within Scriptural guidelines (1 Cor. 14:29-36), should genuinely seek the edification of the church and not their own prestige (1 Cor. 14:12, 26), and should not dominate the meeting or be overly dramatic in their speech (and thus attract attention to themselves rather than to the Lord). Prophecies should be evaluated according to the teachings of Scripture.

- If the gift of prophecy begins to be used in your church, place even more emphasis on the vastly superior value of Scripture as the place where Christians can always go to hear the voice of the living God. Prophecy is a valuable gift, but it is in Scripture that God speaks to us his very words today. Rather than hoping at every worship service that the highlight will be some word of prophecy, those who use the gift of prophecy need to be reminded that we should focus our expectation of hearing from God toward the Bible, and we should delight in God himself as he speaks through the Bible. And rather than seeking frequent guidance through prophecy, we should emphasize that it is in Scripture that we are to find guidance for our lives. □

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