

Prophecy

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Prophecy in the Bible was an authoritative communication by God to His people through an individual (cf. Revelation 10:7; 16:15; 22:7). A literal rendering of the Greek word for prophet (*prophetes*) is “one who speaks before God,” that is, someone who speaks in the name of God. The message of a prophet was a direct revelation from God. Old Testament prophecies consisted of two basic elements: fore-telling and forth-telling. That is, they were God’s revelation about the future and God’s revelation about the present. Both aspects were God’s direct revelation to man.

In the New Testament, prophets ranked second in importance only behind the apostles (1 Corinthians 12:28-31; Ephesians 4:11). With the apostles, the New Testament prophets were considered the foundation upon which the church was built (Ephesians 2:20). New Testament prophecies were identical in nature to Old Testament prophecies. Both were God’s direct revelation to man and both included new information regarding the present and the future.

New Testament prophecy is not the same as modern preaching or teaching

In order to see a continuing nature to prophecy, some have defined prophecy different in the New Testament. One approach is to teach that the New Testament gift of prophecy is not new revelation from God but simply gathered from the completed revelation of God in the Bible. Prophecy under this definition would be declaring God’s Word from the Scripture, such as occurs in a typical worship service. The New Testament prophet would then be understood as proclaiming truth already revealed, not a source of new truth from the mind of God.

There are two fatal problems with this understanding of prophecy in the New Testament:

1. Since there is no question that prophecy in the Old Testament is direct revelation from God, what is the basis for changing the definition when the word is used in the New Testament. There must be a compelling reason to understand prophecy to be fundamentally different and there simply is none.
2. If prophecy is the declaration of God’s Word from Scripture, then what is teaching? How are the two distinct? There simply is not a difference.

David Farnell writes, “To equate preaching with the spiritual gift of prophecy is fallacious. Such an equation is also quite artificial. While preaching is essentially a merging of the gifts of teaching and exhortation, prophecy has the primary elements of prediction and revelation. As Friedrich notes, ‘All prophecy rests on revelation (1 Corinthians 14:30)’... Therefore, since the preacher is not in contact with God as was the prophet, the preacher is not the modern equivalent of a prophet.”

New Testament prophecy is not in error

Another mistaken attempt to understand prophecy as continuing today is to define the New Testament prophecy as divided between apostolic prophecy, which is from God, infallible and on par with Old Testament prophecy and the gift of prophecy, which is also from God but meant to edify, encourage and console. While this supposed secondary prophecy is also direct revelation from God, it may not be entirely accurate and alleged prophet may then be in error with his prophecy.

This forces the obvious question, “How can any message from God contain error?” If God is perfect and without defect, then all that He produces is perfect and without defect. God can allow error, but he can never speak error. Human prophets no more necessarily corrupt the revelation of God anymore than the human authors of Scripture corrupted the revelation of God. A fallible revelation from God is a contradiction in terms.

In light of this, Deuteronomy 18:21-22 specifically describes the test of a prophet. If the prophet is in error, then the Scripture instructs us to conclude the prophecy is not from God. The penalty for prophesying falsely was death (18:20). The only biblical test for a prophet is truthfulness and the flawed understanding of New Testament prophets being wrong is in stark contrast to Deuteronomy 18.

It is important to note that false prophets sometimes prophesied accurately (Deuteronomy 13:2). Even if what a “prophet” says comes true, the prophet is not necessarily genuine. Jeremiah 5:30-31 provides an accurate commentary on the charismatic movement’s prophetic practices, “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priest rule on their own authority; and my people love it so!” We must likewise describe the embracing of prophets who even themselves admit to being in error as “an appalling and horrible thing.”

Prophecy does not occur today

Before we explain why prophecy does not occur presently a couple of clarifications are in order. First, we are not teaching that God cannot reveal Himself through prophets if He chooses to. Second, we are not teaching that God will not reveal Himself through prophets ever again.

We certainly acknowledge God’s ability, yet we also observe that He has chosen to complete His revelation to the church. One day the age of the church will end when Jesus Christ returns at the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18). After the church age and during the period of the seven year tribulation, we see prophets once again functioning (Revelation 11).

There are a number of good reasons why we believe that the only prophecy that God is currently to reveal Himself is found in the pages of the Bible. The reasons why we believe that prophets are no longer functioning to provide us with new revelation from God are detailed below:

1. The current practice of “prophecy” is not revelation from God

Both the propensity for falsehood in prophecy among charismatics and the common practice of simply regurgitating existing revelation under the auspices of “prophecy” provides convincing evidence that the gift of prophecy as described in the New Testament has ceased.

Norman Geisler writes an excellent summary, “Either those who claim the gift of prophecy are uttering infallible truths on par with those in the Bible or else the New Testament gift of prophecy does not exist today. For the ‘prophecies’ given today are not infallible, but are often false. Thus, we must conclude that the New Testament gift of prophecy does not exist today.”

What is being practiced in charismatic circles today is clearly not direct revelation from God and to claim it to be only cheapens the genuine gift of prophecy.

2. The testimony of church history shows that prophecy has ceased

Church history is a serious problem for charismatics who attempt to defend their practices since its silence of church history regarding prophecy is deafening. The church throughout the centuries has been noticeably absent of charismatics and prophecy. On the occasions when certain mystics claimed special revelation, the church responded with strong opposition. Three examples below testify to the early church’s resolve concerning the cessation of prophecy.

a. Montanism

Montanism was a movement that claimed to practice tongues speaking and claimed new revelation from God in the second century. Montanus fell into a trance in a village in Phrygia in 156 and reportedly began to “prophesy under the influence of the Spirit.” Two young women also allegedly prophesied (Priscilla and Maximilla), and with their help the movement quickly spread through Asia Minor. Montanus claimed to have a new and final revelation, foretold the return of Christ and the establishment of the New Jerusalem in Phrygia, encouraged fasting and welcomed persecution.

Bishops in Asia Minor excommunicated the Montanists about 177. The Second Ecumenical Council, the Council of Constantinople in 381, which met with 150 church fathers to settle the Arian controversy and approved the Nicene Creed, decreed that Montanism was tantamount to paganism. Augustine also opposed this movement. The sect of Montanism survived until the 6th century. The failure of the Montanists and the early church’s resolve against them caused those advocating special revelation from God to be viewed with great disdain until the twentieth century charismatic movement.

b. The Muratorian Fragment

One of the first references to the early church’s view on the cessation of prophecy is from the *Muratorian Fragment*, which dates from around 170 A.D. This document

contains the oldest existing list of recognized books of the New Testament canon. It explicitly states that the number of both apostles and prophets “is complete” and thereby indicates an end to prophecy.

c. John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom (c. 350 - 407 A.D.) was a leading figure in the fourth century. He was appointed the bishop at Constantinople and was widely traveled and aware of the state of the early church. The Protestant reformers would later regard Chrysostom as a church father second only to Augustine, because he opposed allegorical interpretation and sought the exact, literal meaning of the text.

In *Homilies in First Corinthians*, Chrysostom writes the following regarding the miraculous spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14,

“This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity has produced us again another question, namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more?”

Thomas Edgar comments on the reason why Chrysostom stated that the passage is “very obscure”:

“They [miraculous gifts] no longer occurred in the Church and they had not occurred for a sufficient length of time that the facts regarding them had dropped from available knowledge, so that the passage is considered obscure by the time of this homily.”

The testimony concerning the cessation of revelation that comes from church history is certainly strong evidence for the fact that there are no continuing revelations from God being given to man.

3. 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 teaches that prophecy will cease to exist

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 specifically teaches that prophecy will cease to exist. However, the passage does not clearly specify when this will occur. There are two basic views as to the timing of the end of prophecy, either prophecy will be done away at the second coming of Christ or prophecy will be done away when the canon of Scripture is completed.

Both interpretations rest on a particular definition of the word “perfect” in 1 Corinthians 13:10. At issue is whether “perfect” is quantitative or qualitative. That is, whether “perfect” means a completing of what was incomplete, or whether “perfect” means a perfecting of what was imperfect.

Below is an evaluation of why the view that prophecy is done away at the close of the New Testament is best:

The Old Testament depicts periods of special revelation which cease with the

passing of prophets. The Book of Acts describes miracles, signs and wonder at a decreasing rate in the history of the early church. Church history validates the ceasing of prophetic revelation and the gifts that confirmed this revelation.

Why does 1 Corinthians 13:8 only include gifts associated with God's revelation? All gifts will end with the return of Christ, so what would be the point of noting that these gifts in particular end with Christ? It is much better to describe them as ending with the close of the New Testament which sets them apart from non-revelatory gifts.

The word for perfect (*TELEIOS*) in 1 Corinthians 13:10 has a well established meaning of "complete." Also, Paul never uses *TELEIOS* to mean absolute perfection, which occurs at the return of Christ. The completion of the New Testament fits Paul's usage of *TELEIOS* much better (cf. Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 2:6; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 3:12, 15; Colossians 1:28; 4:12).

Understanding *TELEIOS* in 1 Corinthians 13:10 as "complete" makes more sense than "perfect" because of the contrast with "partial." The completed Scripture is the reason why the partial, or incomplete, prophecy and knowledge are done away, for they are no longer necessary. This is better than trying to contrast the perfection of Christ's return with the imperfection of prophecy and knowledge. Prophecy is not *imperfect*, it is rather *incomplete*. This then views both "in part" and "perfect" as quantitative, rather than "in part" as quantitative and "perfect" as qualitative.

1 Corinthians 13:11 describes a development from childhood to maturity, which is not instantaneous but gradual. This illustration does not fit the return of Christ nearly as well as it fits the gradual reduction of prophecy as the New Testament is being written.

We know in part before the completion of the New Testament (1 Corinthians 13:9) and with the completion of the canon the partial revelation of prophecy will be done away (1 Corinthians 13:10). The partial being done away does not need to mean that we then know fully (1 Corinthians 13:12). This final knowledge can be understood to be a separate occasion at the coming of Christ.

1 Corinthians 13:11 describes the increasing completeness of God's revelation while 13:12 describes the absolute completeness at the return of Christ. Thus, these two verses complement each other.

The reason why the completeness of God's revelation in the Scripture is in the context of the return of Christ (1 Corinthians 13:12) is because Paul entertained the definite possibility that Jesus would return soon (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). He was aware that if the Lord returned soon the fullness of knowledge would also render the gifts unnecessary.

This view best allows for the contrast of 1 Corinthians 13:13. In contrast to the three gifts which will not endure throughout the church age (prophecy, tongues and knowledge) are the three virtues which will endure throughout the age (faith, hope and love). This temporal understanding of the virtues is further affirmed when we

learn that love is the greatest, in that it alone is permanent while faith and hope will be fulfilled when we see Christ face to face (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:6-8; Romans 8:24-25). Love is the greatest in the sense that love abides forever, it never fails (1 Corinthians 13:8).

While this is a difficult passage to understand, the least weight of objection is with the view that prophecy, knowledge and tongues ceased with the closed of the New Testament. For the reasons listed above, it is best to conclude that 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 teaches that the gift of prophecy, along with tongues and knowledge, was a temporary gift that is no longer operative today. This interpretation is confirmed by other New Testament passages and by the testimony of church history.

4. The foundation of the church ended the need for apostles and prophets

Ephesians 2:20 teaches that the church is founded on the apostles and prophets. Ephesians 3:5 makes it clear that apostles and New Testament prophets were of primary importance as vehicles of revelation, thereby providing the foundation for the church. The apostles and prophets passed on as the church is established and God's revelation is completed in the church age. This role of founding the church was completed in the first century and there is never again a need for apostles and prophets to repeat the establishment of the church.

In his commentary on Ephesians 2:20, John Stott notes,

“Just as the foundation cannot be tampered with once it has been laid and the superstructure is being built upon it, so the New Testament foundation of the church is inviolable and cannot be changed by any additions, subtractions, or modifications offered by teachers who claim to be apostles or prophets today. The church stands or falls by its loyal dependence on the foundation truths which God revealed to his apostles and prophets, and which are now preserved in the New Testament Scriptures.”

5. Prophecy has been replaced by teaching (2 Peter 2:1)

The implication of the comparison in 2 Peter 2:1 between false prophets in the past and false teachers in the future is that teaching from the completed revelation of God will replace prophetic messages of new revelation from God. Just as prophecy was counterfeited by Satan in Israel during the days of the prophets and in the church during the first century, destructive heresy also will come in the form of those posing as teachers of God's existing revelation.

6. The Scripture is final and complete (Jude 3)

Jude 3 teaches us to contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. The faith, according to Greek scholar Henry Alford, is “objective here: the sum of that which Christians believe.” What we believe was delivered to us once for all. We did not discover it but it was delivered to us, in the Bible. The faith is not continuing to be delivered but already has been delivered. It does not need to be

added to for its results are lasting and complete. This verse deems continued revelation from God in the church age to have ceased.

7. Prophecy after the close of the New Testament is condemned (Rev. 22:18)

Revelation 22:18-19 is an unusual warning, unique to the New Testament, regarding the addition or subtraction of prophecy. While certainly the purpose of Revelation 22:19 is to guard against tampering and to preserve the text, it also warns against adding to it. This may be understood as prohibiting additional prophecy. This corresponds to the diminished prophecy at the end of the New Testament.

Also, these words may have been more necessary in light of the problem of false teachers claiming that their teaching was authoritative revelation from God. 1 John 4:1 gives evidence that the apostle John was concerned about fraudulent claims to prophecy. Since Revelation is the climax of biblical prophecy and the culmination of New Testament revelation, Revelation 22:18-19 seems to prohibit both later revelations alleged to be from God and later changes in the Scripture.

Conclusion

There are many people claiming to receive words from God. If God is speaking to any of these people His words would be authoritative, infallible and without error. The Bible makes it clear that falsely claiming a word from God is a very serious matter (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). Receiving such presumption leads to harm and we are called to protect ourselves from false prophecy (1 John 4:1). It is to the discredit of the church that so many allow prophecy to pass without examination. We must hold what God really says much more highly and not be deluded by claims of prophecy.

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